

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY

HIMA



▶▶▶ ACCEL•WORLD

24

SWORD SAGE OF THE BLUE FLOWER

「………」
「………」
「………」





HIMA

ACCEL WORLD

24

SWORD SAGE OF THE BLUE FLOWER

[illegible]



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SWORD SAGE OF THE BLUE FLOWER

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**

DESIGN BY **bee-pee**





RIN KUSAKABE

Girl who adores Haruyuki.
Member of the Green Legion.
Great Wall.
Duel creator: Ash Roller.
(During duels, ownership of
her consciousness shifts to her
older brother.)

*"Haven't I already
told you...that I like
you...?"*

"Mmm, what?
Night attack?"

"What are you
two doing?!"



"Come,
Claiomh
Soldais."

"Equip Lucid
Blade!"

CENTAUREA SENTRY
User of the Omega-style Whole
Blade. The third Chrome Disaster.
Supposedly struck down by the
Blue King and forever banished
from the Accelerated World...

SILVER CROW
Member of the new Nega
Nebulus. Possesses the sole flying
ability in the Accelerated World.
Red world. Haruyuki Arino.

Duel avatar and Enemy list

Legions of Pure Color

Black Legion: Nega Nebulus

Master: Black Lotus (Kuroyukihime)

Submaster: Scarlet Rain (Yuniko Kozuki)

Executive branch name: Four Elements

Wind: Sky Raker (Fuko Kurasaki)

Fire: Ardor Maiden (Utai Shinomiya)

Water: Aqua Current (Akira Himi)

Lime Bell (Chiyuri Kurashima)

Cyan Pile (Takumu Mayuzumi)

Silver Crow (Haruyuki Arita)

Chocolat Puppeter (Shihoko Nago)

Mint Mitten (Satomi Mito)

Plum Flipper (Yume Yuruki)

Magenta Scissor (Rui Odagiri)

Trilead Tetroxide

Executive branch name: Triplex

No. 1: Blood Leopard (Mihaya Kakei)

No. 2: Cassis Moose

No. 3: Thistle Porcupine

Blaze Heart

Peach Parasol

Ochre Prison

Mustard Salticid

Ash Roller (Rin Kusakabe)

Bush Utan

Olive Grab

Temporarily
transferred from
Great Wall

Blue Legion: Leonids

Master: Blue Knight

Executive branch name: Dualis

Cobalt Blade (Koto Takanouchi)

Manganese Blade (Yuki Takanouchi)

Frost Horn

Tourmaline Shell

Green Legion: Great Wall

Master: Green Grandé

Executive branch name: Six Armors

First seat: Graphite Edge

Second seat: Viridian Decurion

Third seat: Iron Pound

Fourth seat: Lignum Vitae

Fifth seat: Suntan Chafer

Sixth seat: ???

Jade Jailer

Yellow Legion: Crypt Cosmic Circus

Master: Yellow Radio

Lemon Pierette

Sax Loader

Purple Legion: Aurora Oval

Master: Purple Thorn

Executive branch name: ???

Aster Vine

White Legion: Oscillatory Universe

Master: White Cosmos

Executive branch name: Seven Dwarves

No. 1: Platinum Cavalier

No. 2: Snow Fairy

No. 3: Rose Milady

No. 4: Ivory Tower

No. 5: ???

No. 6: ???

No. 7: Glacier Behemoth

Shadow Cloaker

Other Legions

Acceleration Research Society

Black Vise

Argon Array

Dusk Taker (Seiji Nomi)

Rust Jigsaw

Sulfur Pot

Wolfram Cerberus (Armor of Catastrophe Mark II)

Computation and Martial Arts Research Club

Aluminum Valkyrie (Chiaki Chigira)

Orange Raptor (Yuko Hori)

Violet Dancer (Kurumi Kuruma)

Iris Alice (Lilya Usachova)

Affiliation unknown

Avocado Avoider

Nickel Doll

Sand Duct

Crimson Kingbolt

Lagoon Dolphin (Ruka Asato)

Coral Merrow (Mana Itosu)

Orchid Oracle (Megumi Wakamiya)

Tin Writer

Enemies

Four Divines

Archangel Metatron (Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth)

Amaterasu (Tokyo Station Underground Labyrinth)

???

???

Four Gods of the Four Gates

East gate: Seiryu

West gate: Byakko

South gate: Suzaku

North gate: Genbu

Eight Gods of the Shrine of the Eight Divines

???

Sealed Enemies

Goddess Nyx (Yoyogi Park Underground Labyrinth)

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SWORD SAGE OF THE BLUE FLOWER

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



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ON**
NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 24
REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen
Cover art by HIMA

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ACCEL WORLD Vol. 24

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2019 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: April 2021

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kawahara, Reki, author. | HIMA (Comic book artist) illustrator. | bee-pee, designer. | Allen, Jocelyne, 1974– translator.

Title: Accel World / Reki Kawahara ; illustrations, HIMA ; design, bee-pee ; translation by Jocelyne Allen.

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2014–

Identifiers: LCCN 2014025099 | ISBN 9780316376730 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296366 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296373 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296380 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296397 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296403 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316358194 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316317610 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316502702 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316466059 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316466066 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316466073 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975300067 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327231 (v. 14 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327255 (v. 15 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327279 (v. 16 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327293 (v. 17 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327316 (v. 18 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332181 (v. 19 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332716 (v. 20 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332730 (v. 21 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332778 (v. 22 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332754 (v. 23 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975321338 (v. 24 : pbk.)

Subjects: CYAC: Science fiction. | Virtual reality—Fiction. | Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.K1755Kaw 2014 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2014025099>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-2133-8 (paperback)

978-1-9753-2134-5 (ebook)

E3-20210311-JV-NF-ORI

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).

■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level six).

■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level five).

■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level six).

■ Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).

■ Uiui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.

■ Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

■ Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.

■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.

■ Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.

■ Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

■ **Normal Duel Field** = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.

■ **Unlimited Neutral Field** = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order than that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.

■ **Movement Control System** = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.

■ **Image Control System** = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal Movement Control System, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.

■ **Incarnate System** = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's Image Control System to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.

■ **Acceleration Research Society** = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.

■ **Armor of Catastrophe** = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.

■ **Star Caster** = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.

■ **ISS kit** = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to access the Incarnate System. When the kit is used, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.

■ **Seven Arcs** = The seven strongest Enhanced Armaments in the Accelerated World. They are the greatsword *Impulse*, the staff *Tempest*, the large shield *Strife*, the Luminary (form unknown), the straight sword *Infinity*, the full-body armor *Destiny*, and the *Fluctuating Light* (form unknown).

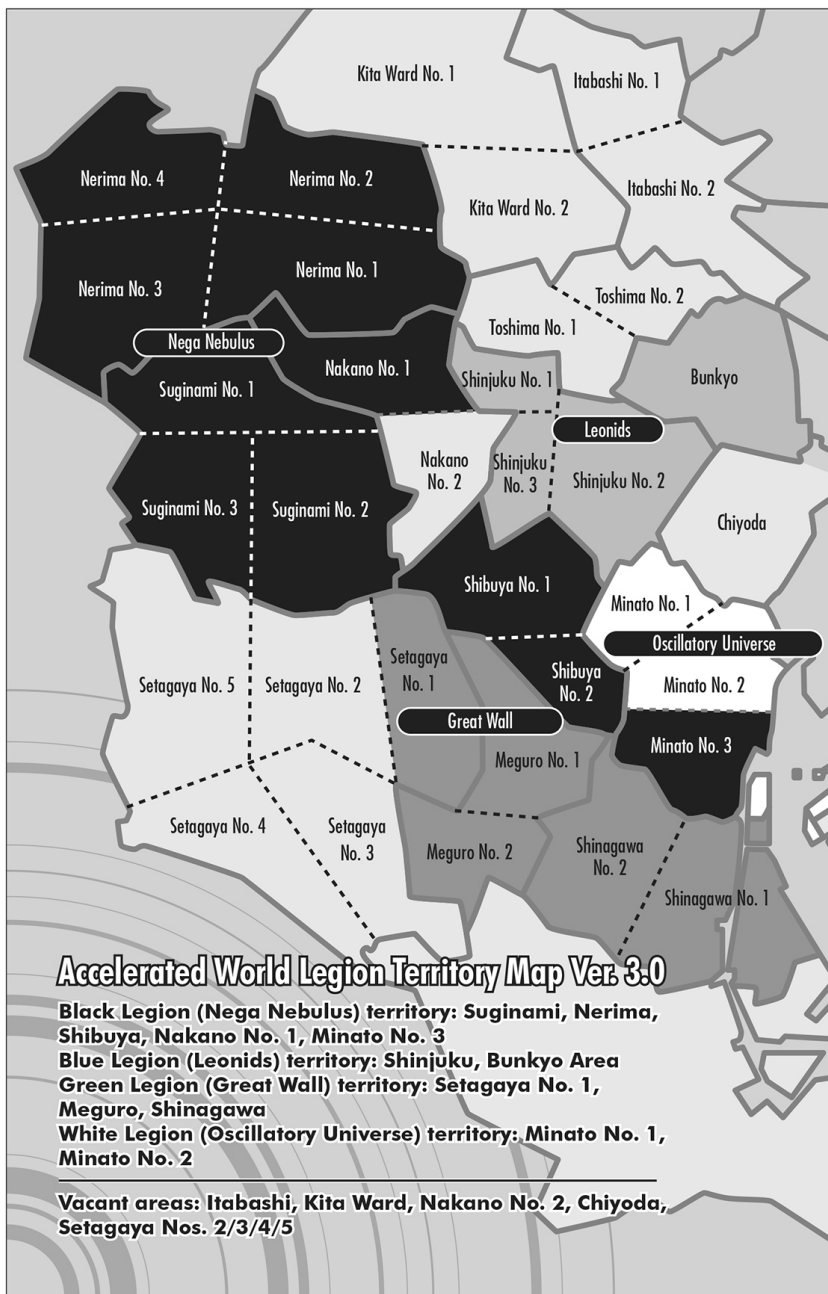
■ **Mental-Scar Shell** = The emotional scars that are the foundation of a duel avatar (mental scars created from trauma in early childhood)—this is the shell enveloping them. Children with exceptionally hard and thick “shells” are said to produce metal-color duel avatars.

■ **Artificial metal color** = Refers to a metal-color avatar that is not generated naturally from the subject's mental scars, but rather produced artificially by a third party through the thickening of the Mental-Scar Shell.

■ Unlimited EK = Abbreviation for Unlimited Enemy Kill. The subject avatar is killed by a powerful Enemy in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and each time they regenerate (after a fixed period of time), they are killed again by that Enemy, falling into an infinite hell.

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Accelerated World Legion Territory Map Ver. 3.0

Black Legion (Nega Nebulus) territory: Suginami, Nerima, Shibuya, Nakano No. 1, Minato No. 3

Blue Legion (Leonids) territory: Shinjuku, Bunkyo Area

Green Legion (Great Wall) territory: Setagaya No. 1, Meguro, Shinagawa

White Legion (Oscillatory Universe) territory: Minato No. 1, Minato No. 2

Vacant areas: Itabashi, Kita Ward, Nakano No. 2, Chiyoda, Setagaya Nos. 2/3/4/5

“Two-zero-three-two, zero-nine, three-zero.”

The eight numbers Haruyuki murmured sent the water just below his mouth rippling. Small concentric waves spread out, hit the edge of the tub, and disappeared. He'd slid his whole body down deep into the bath so that the water was right up to his nose, allowing him to blow bubbles as he sank into thought.

I'll probably never forget those numbers.

He'd had them memorized for a while now, as September 30, 2032, was the birthdate of his Legion Master and parent, Kuroyukihime. But the previous evening, the meaning of those numbers had changed forever, in the moment the purple bar code printed on the nape of her pale neck had been revealed.

For Haruyuki, as an eighth-grade boy sound of both mind and body, having a bath with a girl a year older should have left him wrestling with the physical shock of it for a week or two. But carved deep into Haruyuki's memory was not the elegant naked body he saw through the steam nor the smooth feel of the back he washed with the bath sponge, but rather Kuroyukihime's shocking confession.

“I wasn't born from my mother's stomach. I was an embryo raised in an artificial womb after being fertilized outside the body—a so-called machine child.

“I was equipped with a Neurolinker while I was still in the artificial womb and soul duplication measures were implemented. The bar code on my neck is a vestige of that. Meaning that on the soul level, I have no connection with my parents whatsoever.”

Kuroyukihime had told Haruyuki all of this while they soaked in the bath, facing each other.

Her confession should have stunned him, but it also made certain things click into place. The recklessness Kuroyukihime demonstrated from time to time—for instance, whenever she acted with no consideration for her own safety, like when she saved Haruyuki from an out-of-control car—perhaps that came from knowing hers was an artificial birth. In which case, that was a very sad thing. Even if she had been born from an artificial womb, that didn't devalue her

existence and purpose as a human in the slightest...

...because she was the one and only Kuroyukihime, loved by so many in both the real world and the Accelerated World.

The previous day when she'd told him all of this, he had tried to get that message across with all the words at his disposal. But now that he was back at home and thinking about it alone, he couldn't shake the feeling that he hadn't said nearly enough. He should have told her more, should have repeated himself until he was blue in the face, should have insisted on how much he cherished her, how grateful he was to have met her.

He transformed another sigh into bubbles before plugging his ears with his fingers. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and sank down, his face turned toward the ceiling.

The Arita bathroom was large for a condo, and the bathtub itself was also quite big, allowing Haruyuki, who was fairly short, to be completely submerged if he just bent his legs slightly. He'd run the bath on the lukewarm side, so the boundary between the temperature of his skin and the bathwater grew ambiguous. The water silenced the noise of the air conditioner, so the only sound he heard was his own heartbeat.

Was this what it was like inside an artificial womb?

Naturally, even the great Kuroyukihime didn't remember the time before her birth. But there was a theory that human beings maintained a so-called prenatal memory until they were two or three years old. If even just a hint of the memories of the artificial womb remained in the deepest recesses of her mind, then he wanted to try to understand them and share this with her.

He was running out of air, but he forced himself to stay underwater. Finally, when he felt like his chest might explode, he pushed his head up through the surface of the water and gasped for air.

I want to be stronger, Haruyuki wished fervently as he inhaled ragged breaths.

He'd been wishing for this since he became a Burst Linker—and maybe even long before that. But this longing that spurred him on was so deep and intense that he wanted to shout it out loud.

He didn't only want to become stronger as a Burst Linker. He wanted to be stronger as a person. Strong enough that he could permanently dispel everything that tortured the heart of his beloved.

He thrust a fist up out of the bath, high into the air. He swung his clenched hand back down but then stopped himself on the verge of punching the water.

He wouldn't get anywhere by rushing. He had to keep moving forward, keep persevering, one step at a time. Or if that was too

much, a half step. Or even a finger inching along. He had so much to do. In the real world and in the Accelerated World.

“Kuroyukihime, I’m absolutely going to...”

He swallowed the rest of this declaration, stood up, and got out of the tub.

When he returned to his bedroom after drying his hair, the midsummer sun reflecting on the floor of the balcony dyed the whole room white.

July 22, 2:00 PM: It was only the second day of summer break, but it felt like more than a week had passed already. And that was because so many things had happened since the last day of school.

Yesterday, Black Vise and Wolfram Cerberus had barged into the meeting of the Seven Kings—or to be more accurate, the White King's full proxy, Ivory Tower, had finally revealed his true identity—and dropped the Legend-class Enemy the Sun God Inti onto the Nippon Budokan, the meeting venue, thereby pushing the Blue King, Blue Knight; the Green King, Green Grandé; the Yellow King, Yellow Radio; the Purple King, Purple Thorn; and the Black King, Black Lotus, into a state of Unlimited EK.

Fortunately, the Red King, Scarlet Rain, and the others at the meeting had managed to escape, but the whole incident was a serious blow to Haruyuki and Nega Nebulus. Nevertheless, they were looking ahead rather than back and, at a Legion meeting, had come up with a strategy to rescue the Black King. They were ready to leap into action the very same day, and this was when Haruyuki received a message from Rose Milady, the third of the Seven Dwarves, which was the executive branch of the White Legion.

Trusting Rose when she said that she wanted to rescue Orchid Oracle/Megumi Wakamiya, who was a pawn in the plan of the White Legion—well, the Acceleration Research Society, really—Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime went with her to the National Center for Child Health and Development, where Megumi was hospitalized. Direct-linking with the unconscious girl, who had been in a coma for nearly two days, Rose and Haruyuki dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field and rescued Oracle from Tokyo Midtown Tower, a place deeply connected to all of the Society's scheming, where she was being held prisoner.

At the time, Haruyuki had also liberated the wandering blacksmith NPC Mr. Smith—a drone—who was being held captive

there for some reason, and gotten his Enhanced Armament Lucid Blade modified to nullify fire damage. Naturally, he did this as a countermeasure for the Sun God's intense heat, but the strategy the attendants of the meeting of the Seven Kings hammered out for the Black King's rescue had cast Trilead Tetroxide and his Arc of Infinity in the attacker role. There had been no time for Haruyuki to do anything else, however, and now attacking Inti was his job.

Can I really take on an important role like this the way I am now...?

He was seized by a moment of weakness as he stared out at the midsummer sun burning down on the veranda outside. Then he heard a faint *ding*, and his mail icon flashed.

The message was from Kuroyukihime. He hurriedly tapped the icon to open the message.

THEY FINISHED MEGUMI'S TESTS EARLIER. THEY DIDN'T FIND ANY ANOMALIES IN HER BRAIN, SO THEY'RE LETTING HER GO HOME TOMORROW. I'LL TELL YOU THE DETAILS LATER. I JUST WANTED TO THANK YOU ON BEHALF OF MEGUMI AND ROSE, TOO. HARUYUKI, THANK YOU SO MUCH.

It was her usual brief message, but Kuroyukihime's relief still came through loud and clear. Haruyuki heaved a sigh of relief and replied, THAT'S GREAT. PLEASE TELL WAKAMIYA TO FEEL BETTER SOON.

Megumi had woken up just after ten that morning. Kuroyukihime and Rose Milady, aka Tsubomi Koshika, had stayed at the hospital, but Haruyuki had figured it would be difficult for Megumi to change clothes or eat with him in the room, so he'd left a little earlier than the girls. On his way home, he'd stopped by school to tend to Hoo, but he still made it back to his condo before lunch. And since his mother was away until the next morning, he had his first pocket of free time in ages.

Haruyuki lay down on his bed and wondered whether he should read the new manga magazine or maybe clear that retro RPG he was in the middle of before pushing all such temptations aside and moving to the living room. He poured himself a glass of cold barley tea, sat down at the dining table, and launched the Umesato integrated study app.

He'd worked pretty hard at Kuroyukihime's the night before, but he still had plenty of summer homework left to do. His goal was to finish it all in July—or if that was impossible, in the first week of August—so he couldn't exactly skip a day now. He decided to go for it and tapped the math tab, then started to solve the simultaneous equations, virtual pen in one hand.

The old Haruyuki hadn't been able to concentrate for even a full ten minutes, but lately, he felt like he had pretty decent control over the gears in his head. The basic reason he hadn't been able to focus was because somewhere inside of him, he resisted the whole endeavor

—he didn't want to do it; it was boring and annoying. But if he shifted his mind to a deeper level like when he was training in the Accelerated World, those extraneous thoughts disappeared—well, not exactly, but he could push the intruding ideas far away into the background. One hour of focus was more productive than three hours of scattered thoughts.

Wetting his throat from time to time with tea, Haruyuki plowed through the problems on the page, his mind clear and focused. For this assignment, not only did he have to give the answer, but he also had to write down how he arrived at that answer (not on real paper, naturally, but on e-paper), so he couldn't cheat using a calculator app. When he got stuck, he opened his textbook and glared at the solutions to similar problems, looking for a hint. At some point each time, when he thought about it hard enough, he would get a flash of insight and his hand would start to move in a rush.

He took care of five pages of math homework this way. He let out a sigh before drinking the rest of his now-lukewarm tea.

Ding-dong! He heard the chime announcing a visitor. It wasn't the front doorbell, but rather the intercom on the first floor of the condo building. A visitor window popped up, and there he saw...

"Huh? K-Kuroyukihime?!"

The girl wearing a white, wide-brimmed hat and a teal dress was without a doubt Kuroyukihime. Since she was wearing different clothes than when they'd said good-bye at the hospital, she must have stopped at home before coming over. But why?

"Uh, um, wh-what's the matter?" he asked automatically.

The Kuroyukihime on the screen shrugged. "What do you mean? I said in my message that I would tell you the details later, didn't I?"

"So by 'later,' you meant *immediately afterward*?!"

"You can't really interpret it any other way."

I don't know about that, he thought, but naturally, actually saying this out loud was not an option. He quickly tapped the unlock button. "Um, c-c-come on in!"

"Mmm. Thanks."

She waved and disappeared through the automatic doors to the left of the screen. Haruyuki hurriedly stood up and looked down at himself. He was in shorts and a T-shirt that he kept for lounging around the house, but since he'd just had a bath before changing into them, they didn't stink of sweat. While he was at it, he scanned the living room and checked that nothing was lying about.

He dashed to the front entryway and set out the nicest slippers at the perfect angle when the chime rang again. When he undid the electronic lock and opened the door, he was greeted by the scent of citrus and a blast of hot air.

“H-hello, Kuroyukihime. You must be hot.”

“Mm-hmm. Makes me worry what August will be like,” the older girl said as she stepped inside, but she wasn’t sweating in the slightest. Haruyuki wondered if this was another thing she had conquered with the power of her Incarnate will as he moved to close the door.

However...

“Hey! I’m here, too, you know!”

“Oh! I’m sorry. Come in...”

He pulled the door back open and found a petite young woman in a dress-type school uniform standing there. Tsubomi Koshika/Rose Milady. He’d parted from her a mere five hours ago.

A previous incarnation of Haruyuki would have jumped in surprise, but he managed to curb that impulse as he asked, “Y-you came with Kuroyukihime, Koshika?”

Tsubomi looked at him through the gap in her long fringe. “You’re not surprised? And I even went and crouched down below the camera so you would be.”

Now that she mentioned it, it *had* only been Kuroyukihime in the visitor window.

“Wh-why would you do that?”

“Just playing around.” She shrugged.

“That’s...I deeply apologize for not living up to your expectations.”

I mean, I can’t go jumping at every little thing for the rest of my life, he thought as he set out another pair of slippers.

“Ah!!” Someone hit his back, and Haruyuki jumped high into the air, letting out a pathetic shriek.

“Ngaaaaaaah?!”

He fell backward onto his butt in the entryway and looked up to find his childhood friend standing in front of the door, wearing a knit shirt and culottes.

“Ah...Chiyu?! You too?!”

“We ran into each other in the elevator,” Kuroyukihime explained from behind.

Chiyuri Kurashima grinned. “That was exactly the reaction I expected, Haru.”

“...You didn’t *actually* just come to scare me, did you?”

“I would never.” Her jovial expression turned to exasperation, and she held up the tote bag in her left hand. “I figured you were eating like crap, so I brought you dinner, see? Bow down to me!”

Faced with her might, all he could do was acquiesce with a “Yes, fine.” Chiyuri was exactly right—for lunch, he’d heated up some frozen fried rice, and that was it. “Y-you bring great blessings...Well, come on in, then.”

He set out a third pair of slippers and showed the girls into the comfortably cool living room. They sat down at the dining table, and he brought dishes and barley tea out from the kitchen.

The three large plastic containers that appeared from inside the tote bag contained a peerless lineup of finger sandwiches stuffed with different toppings, a green salad with plenty of broccoli, fried chicken, and asparagus wrapped in deli meat. There was more than enough for the four of them to eat their fill.

“Chiyu, did you know that Kuroyukihime and Koshika were coming?” Haruyuki asked.

Chiyuri moved her head quickly from side to side. “Uh-uh, not a clue.”

“So then why so much food...?”

“Mom said I should bring you at least three meals, since we were going to the trouble anyway. I was just as surprised as you when I got in the elevator and saw Kuroyuki,” Chiyuri said as she divided the fried chicken onto plates. She turned her gaze on Tsubomi. “So who’s this girl? Someone from Promi?”

What?! They haven’t been introduced yet?!

Haruyuki looked at Kuroyukihime with the question in his eyes, but his Legion Master was dishing out the salad with a look of clear conscience on her face. Tsubomi, beside her, was being Tsubomi and seemed to have no intention of introducing herself.



Left with no other choice, Haruyuki stopped pouring tea and said, “Um, first of all, Chiyu, she’s in ninth grade, so...”

“What? A year older than us?! I’m sorry for being so rude.”

“And she’s not Promi. She’s Oscillatory, so...”

“What? Oscillatory?! Excuse me ag— *Wait*. Whaaaaaaat?!” she cried out wildly and jumped back from the container of chicken, still holding a piece in the chopsticks in her right hand. “Oscillatory! That’s the White Legion!! Why would she come to your house with Kuroyuki?!”

“Um, it’s a long story,” he said. “Anyway, her name’s Tsubomi Koshika. She’s the third of the Seven Dwarves, Rose Milady.” Thus, he introduced his newest guest while setting empty plates on the table.

“Whaaaaaaat?!” Chiyuri shouted twice as loud as before. When the piece of chicken in her chopsticks finally fell at this, Haruyuki caught it deftly in midair with the plate in his left hand.

Twenty minutes later.

By the time the homemade feast lovingly prepared by Chiyu’s mother was nearing its end, Haruyuki had basically finished explaining the situation.

At first, he worried that Chiyuri and Tsubomi wouldn’t get along right away. It was, of course, the first time they were meeting in the real world, but they’d already come face-to-face once in the Accelerated World. And not in the Normal Duel Field but in the Unlimited Neutral Field, where there were no rules.

In the Territories on Saturday, Nega Nebulus launched a surprise attack on Minato Area No. 3, the home base of Oscillatory Universe. Their objective was to strip the White Legion of their right to block the matching list and thus expose the members of the Acceleration Research Society lurking in the area. But Oscillatory had anticipated their attack and used Orchid Oracle’s superdreadnought of an Incarnate technique, Paradigm Breakdown, to change the Territories stage into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

At the height of the intense battle, Haruyuki and Chiyuri had gone off with Trilead, independent of the main squad, and tried to contact Orchid Oracle. Standing in their way was her guard, Rose Milady.

To take down the far more powerful Rose Milady, Haruyuki came up with a desperate strategy that put his own life on the line. While he was grappling with Rose, Trilead sliced through both of them with his Heavenly Stratus, and then Lime Bell used her Citron Call to heal Haruyuki before he died. So Chiyuri had seen her childhood friend split in two in that fight. Thus, he thought she might have some slightly complicated feelings when it came to Rose.

But then, after taking a sip of her after-dinner tea, Chiyuri suddenly said, “That reminds me, Koshika. I’m sorry for using such sneaky tactics during the Territories!” And Haruyuki joined Tsubomi in being briefly at a loss for words.

“Sneaky tactics.” He flapped his mouth open and closed a few times before he managed to ask her, “You mean the strategy where I sacrificed myself?”

“Duh,” Chiyuri replied. “I mean, I’d be totally upset if an enemy cut both of us in half and then only healed themselves!”

“N-no, but we were...,” Haruyuki mumbled in a sad attempt to argue back.

A wry grin bled onto Tsubomi’s face across from him. “Bell—Kurashima, you don’t have to apologize. That fight was no-holds-barred, anything goes, and anyway, your healing ability is an honest power, part of the BB system. If anyone should be taking heat here, it’s us in Oscillatory for changing the Territories stage to the Unlimited Neutral Field in the first place.”

She started to bow her head at them, but Kuroyukihime quickly jabbed at her forehead with her index finger to prop it up. She pushed harder, her finger digging in.

“What are you doing, Lotus?” Tsubomi finally asked.

“No need for you to apologize, either. It was Ivory Tower—or rather, Black Vise who put together that plan, yes?”

“That’s true, but I didn’t oppose it, so I’m also to blame here,” she insisted stubbornly. She tried to force her head down, while Kuroyukihime kept pushing it up.

Staring dumbfounded, Haruyuki thought in a corner of his brain, *Right. That’s what’s weird. Why didn’t Tsubomi say anything against Black Vise’s plan when it used Orchid Oracle like a pawn? Oracle is Saffron Blossom’s child, too, so that means she’s basically Tsubomi’s sister. She has to be the most important person to her in the Accelerated World.*

Tsubomi’s words when they first met at the library in Sasazuka came back to life in his ears.

“My priority is Oracle’s life, over the greater mission of the Legion.”

Greater mission. That was what she’d said. Tsubomi thought the plan—no, the conspiracy of the White King, White Cosmos, and the Acceleration Research Society—was a great mission.

The first of the Seven Dwarves, Platinum Cavalier, had said something similar when they encountered him right before he dropped the Sun God onto them.

“At any rate, even if we are attacked by the kings’ Legions and no one is able to flee...no member would dream of leaving Oscillatory.”

So that meant the nearly thirty Legion members all believed in the greater mission of the White King in the same way as Tsubomi did.

What kind of purpose exactly could be so great as to legitimize tactics like the Armor of Catastrophe and the ISS kits?

Almost as though she had picked up on his thoughts, Tsubomi turned her gaze toward him. Kuroyukihime lowered her finger, and Tsubomi's expression changed.

"Crow...Arita." Tsubomi called him by his real name for the first time and then bit her lip. "You—and of course, Lotus and Bell—have a right to know the truth. About what the White King and Oscillatory Universe want and what they're trying to do. But I need you to wait just a little longer. Once me and Orkki officially leave Oscillatory, I'll lay out everything I know."

Haruyuki had been forced to wait for any number of things since he became a Burst Linker, but the level of suspense for this one was the highest yet. But given the way things were going, he couldn't exactly throw a tantrum over his desire to know.

"I understand," he said finally. "But...you talk about leaving. That won't be easy, though, right? You and the White King are both students at Eter—I mean, EG, so even if you're cut off from the global net, she could totally use the in-school net to hit you with the Judgment Blow."

"Very true." Tsubomi nodded. "Fortunately, however, summer vacation just started, so it's not impossible to keep running from her for a month until the end of the Judgment Blow term."

"Oh! I—I guess so." Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down, but Kuroyukihime, directly across from him, groaned, a complicated look on her face.

"Mmm. But, Koshika, you must have also had your real-world identity revealed to Cosmos and other members, yes? Your house is no doubt near the school, as well. I assume there's a nonzero chance of a PK—an attack in the real?"

"Well, in theory," Tsubomi replied and raised both hands theatrically. "But I can't picture Cosmos, the princess of all princesses, launching an attack in the real. Maybe Fairy or that lot, but in that case, I can strike back." She clenched her hands into small fists and thrust them out as if landing a body blow.

He couldn't help but picture Tsubomi Koshika striking Snow Fairy in the real world with a punch to the gut, but he quickly shook the image out of his head. "Y-you still have to be careful. Oscillatory has boys in it, too, right? I mean, it's not just EG members. It's plenty possible they would come to grab you..."

He'd let his train of thought out unfiltered, but when he saw Tsubomi, Kuroyukihime, and even Chiyuri stiffen, he finally remembered something Niko had told him once. The stronger a girl Burst Linker was in the Accelerated World, the higher tendency she

had in the real world to be on guard against boys. Because in the Accelerated World, F-types could fight M-types as equals, but there was a clear power differential when it came to their real bodies. It was a bit difficult for Haruyuki to wrap his mind around this feeling, but his guess that a group of boys might attack in the real world seemed to have caused far more fear than necessary.

"Uh. Um, I'm sorry," Haruyuki apologized, shrinking into himself. "That came out wrong."

The girls blinked several times before offering begrudging smiles.

"No. After all, we can't say that sort of thing definitely won't happen." Kuroyukihime turned to Tsubomi. "In fact, will you be okay in that area? It does seem like the third of the Seven Dwarves stepping away would be difficult for lower-ranking members to accept."

"I'm not sure," Tsubomi replied. "I haven't really talked to any of the younger kids."

"But, Koshika"—Chiyuri cocked her head—"if you're the executive, you give instructions and things to low rankers, right? Don't you at least make small talk at times like that?"

"Oh, Reaper and Behemoth take care of all that on their own." She paused briefly. "I doubt the younger kids have ever even seen Cosmos."

Now it was Haruyuki who furrowed his brow. Behemoth he knew—the seventh of the Seven Dwarves, Glacier Behemoth. But he had no memory of going into battle against an Oscillatory member with the name Reaper. He dug around in his head, but he was sure the name hadn't been on the member list Kuroyukihime had given out before the Territories.

"As usual, you have absolutely zero short-term memory, Haru," Chiyuri said, looking exasperated, displaying her confidence in her own long-term memory. "The sixth of the Seven Dwarves is Cypress Reaper, okay? I've never seen him, either, but in the notes, it said that he's more of a close-range type."

"Cypress Reaper...", he murmured.

"Reaper was assigned to the defense of Minato One in the Territories the other day," Tsubomi offered. "So he wasn't on the scene of that battle."

"H-he wasn't? Um...Does *leaper* mean someone who jumps?"

"It's not spelled with an *l* in English," Tsubomi corrected him. "It's *reap* with an *r*...Reaper. Cypress is the tree, so literally, it's like 'the cutter of coniferous trees.'"

"Someone who cuts down trees," Haruyuki mused. "So like a lumberjack avatar? With a chain saw or something?"

He'd had a modest amount of faith in this guess in a Haruyuki kind of way, but Tsubomi and even Kuroyukihime burst out laughing.

“Heh-heh! Sorry, but he’s not an avatar as cute as that, Haruyuki,” his Legion Master told him. “The cypress is a symbol of death in the West, and a reaper is also someone who reaps souls. So basically, a god of death. And he looks just like one, too, with the tattered cloak and the scythe.”

“Whoa! A *shinigami*, huh?” Haruyuki shrank into himself again before returning his gaze to Tsubomi. “So then Oscillatory newbies are given instruction by a *shinigami* and that massive Behemoth?”

“Well, basically.”

“Isn’t your dropout rate pretty high?” he asked. “I think I’d be crying by day three.”

“Goodness, Crow! Weren’t you instructed by ‘Strong Arm’ Sky Raker?” Tsubomi asked with a straight face.

Haruyuki glanced over at Kuroyukihime before nodding. “Y-yes, well...Kuroyukihime taught me about the system and know-how of the normal duel, but for Incarnate, it was mainly Master Raker.”

“Training from Reaper and Behemoth is nothing in comparison to that. They might look big and scary, but they’re both pretty solid teachers. Raker, on the other hand...Everyone in the neighboring areas used to talk about her ultra-Spartan style of instruction before her retirement, okay? Although I don’t know how it is now that she’s come back.”

“...”

Haruyuki felt a tight smile rise on his face, given that he couldn’t very well say that Raker’s style was still utterly and completely spartan following her return. His experience the first time they’d met—when he’d gone to her for induction into the Incarnate world and she’d gently but promptly shoved him off the top of the old Tokyo Tower—was still very fresh in his memory.

“When I learn Incarnate, maybe I’ll get Ui to teach me instead of Fuko.” Chiyuri sounded about 70 percent serious.

“N-no fair!” he yelped. “If I could’ve chosen, I would have picked Utai Shinomiya—”

“Oh!” His childhood friend gasped. “I’m totally telling Sis what you said just now!”

“Gah! Don’t do that!” Haruyuki pressed his hands together pleadingly, and Chiyuri stuck her tongue out at him.

“Now, now, both of you, how is it that I am not an option right from the start?” Kuroyukihime sounded peeved as she looked across the table at them. “I do believe I announced my intention to be more active in Incarnate instruction at yesterday’s Legion meeting.”

“O-of course we remember that, but...” Haruyuki trailed off.

Chiyuri picked up where he left off. “I mean, your training’s totally going to be even more spartan than Fuko’s!”

“Oh-ho.” A faint smile formed on their master’s lips. “You’ve gone and said it. I can’t step back now. Perhaps I could give both of you some rather thorough instruction to help with your digestion, hmm?”

“It was Chiyu who said it!” Haruyuki shouted and was about to attempt an escape when Chiyuri grabbed his collar tightly.

Abruptly, Tsubomi let out a huge sigh, so Haruyuki gave up on flight and looked at her. He had expected exasperation, but the smile on Tsubomi’s face was gentle and somehow sad.

“I get it. So this is the truth of Nega Nebulus’s strength.”

“Huh?” Haruyuki frowned. “Th-this what?”

“The air in the room right now.” Tsubomi spread her hands out wide and continued quietly, “The Speed Star, Silver Crow, and the Watch Witch, Lime Bell, they’re such ace Linkers now that there’s basically no one in the Accelerated World who doesn’t know who they are. And that goes double for World End, Black Lotus. Usually, the higher up the ranks you go, the more strained your relationships get, even with members of the same Legion, because Brain Burst is all about stealing points and information from one another. A trusted friend also knows your weak points. To hang on to your position, you build walls so that no information leaks out, and close friends fade away. Unless you’re bound by some pretty strong ties, that is.”

“That’s...” To Haruyuki, this worldview was simply too pessimistic. Because he’d seen how the many Burst Linkers he knew—Prominence’s Triplex or Great Wall’s Six Armors, for instance—trusted one another deeply and shared strengths and weaknesses unstintingly.

However...

“I suppose so,” Kuroyukihime agreed in a low voice. “The Four Elements and I used to be like that, too.”

“That’s...” Haruyuki’s eyes widened. “Walls between you, Master, Shinomiya, and Akira? I mean...”

“If that were true, then Nega Nebulus wouldn’t have been destroyed...Is that what you mean? Well, when I think about it now, I suppose I was the one building walls.”

“...”

He had no ready argument to this, given that he only knew of that era from hearsay, and he gritted his teeth.

“Actually, it’s rare for even the executive members of the Great Legions to have interactions in the real.” Tsubomi stared hard at Haruyuki. “Naturally, parent and child are a different story, but it’s not at all unusual for parent and child to end up killing each other.”

After finally sorting out his feelings, Haruyuki asked her, “A lot of the central members of the White Legion are students at EG, right? Don’t they all see one another in the real?”

“It’s not quite a lot of us,” she told him. “Currently, six, I guess,

including me and Cosmos.”

“Six?!” Chiyuri cried out. Still holding the last finger sandwich in one hand, she openly showed surprise at this fact. “That many is *totally* a lot! I mean, there are only four students at the same school in our Legion, you know?!”

“Just because you’re at the same school doesn’t mean you’re best friends, though, right?” Tsubomi replied, and both Chiyuri and Haruyuki pulled back.

Before they became Burst Linkers, their relationship had been somewhat tense—or rather, Haruyuki had one-sidedly tried to pull away from Chiyuri and had even acted so outrageously that he slapped to the floor the lunch Chiyuri had been kind enough to make him. And beyond that, it was certainly true that it was impossible for all the students at a school to be good friends with one another.

“But still, it’s not like you’re fighting on the everyday level, right? That would make running a Legion seriously hard,” Haruyuki noted. “What kind of relationship do the EG Oscillatory members have, exactly?”

Tsubomi crossed her slender arms in front of her and groaned. “That’s a tough question to answer out of the blue...Okay, I got it. You know how in manga and video games, there’ll be the evil queen and her group of minions?”

“...Y-yeah, I guess,” he said.

“Kinda like that.”

“...”

Given that Haruyuki had taken in a large quantity of this sort of manga, anime, and video games growing up, the analogy was very easy for him to picture, but precisely because of this, he had very detailed images pop into his head: the White King and her five executive lackeys around an elliptical table in a mysterious room in the deepest depths of the Eternal Girls’ Academy. Anytime anyone was teased, she’d leap to her feet with a roar: “What did you say?!” And just when the whole thing was on the verge of exploding, the vice chair would shout, “Quiet! You are before the queen!”

After shaking his head quickly to clear away the absurd image, Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down. “I—I basically get it. But... are you sure you should be talking about the White King like she’s an evil queen?”

“I’m leaving the Legion, so it’s all good. I think.” Tsubomi shrugged. “But yeah, I guess Cosmos isn’t really an evil queen. That’d be more...Purple Thorn’s style. And the evil queen doesn’t fit Cosmos’s whole ‘pretty princess’ image.”

“A saint,” Kuroyukihime said slowly.

Haruyuki couldn’t immediately figure out what she was talking

about, but Tsubomi nodded in agreement.

“A saint, huh? Makes sense. Totally fits her purity politics...Are all the female Catholic saints martyrs, though? I’m pretty sure Cosmos has absolutely no intention of sacrificing herself for anything.”

“True, but she is Transient Eternity at any rate,” Kuroyukihime said with a sardonic smile before sighing. “Well, enough about Cosmos. Right now, let’s talk about you, Koshika. You may have a chance to avoid the Judgment Blow by taking advantage of summer break, but you definitely can’t say you’re safe. Until we find a way of doing something about that, perhaps you’d best not rush to leave the Legion?”

“Oh my!” Tsubomi looked surprised. “Are you sure you should be saying that? What if I change my mind and decide that Oscillatory actually suits me just fine?”

“That’s not likely to happen. Because right now, you value Megumi—Oracle—several times more than you value the Legion.”

Tsubomi looked pained, as though Kuroyukihime’s words hit home. She quietly sipped her tea before replying at last, “You saying that feels weird and complicated, but you’re exactly right. I can’t let Black Vise use Orkki ever again. The only way I can protect her is if we both leave the Legion as soon as possible and seek protection from a new Legion.”

“Huh?” Haruyuki frowned. “Uh, um, a new Legion? You’re not going to join Negabu?”

Tsubomi and Kuroyukihime looked at each other, and then Tsubomi grinned wryly.

“I’m happy you’d say that, but things aren’t that simple. The Legion Orkki and I move to will have to be one that makes the White Legion feel like it’s not to their advantage to be openly hostile. Oscillatory and Negabu are already in a state of all-out war, so there’s no need to make that relationship worse, is there?”

“B-but, I mean, the White Legion put five of the Seven Kings of Pure Color into an Unlimited EK!” he protested. “And, like, that’s a declaration of war unto all the Legions, isn’t it?”

“I guess.” Tsubomi shrugged again. “So rather than one of the kings’ Legions, we’d end up going to a midsize Legion that’s not yet involved in hostilities against Oscillatory.”

It was true that there were plenty of small and midsize Legions in the Accelerated World outside of the six Great Legions. Even just around the Suginami area, a number of names quickly came to mind, like Helix in Itabashi Ward, which was expanding its power base; Night Owls, based in Toshima Ward; and Ovest, active in Nishitokyo. Even Oscillatory Universe likely wouldn’t be able to lay a hand on one of those midsize Legions. Given that they were already facing a full-

frontal attack from the six Great Legions, Tsubomi and Megumi would hesitate to make any more enemies. Naturally, there was a risk to the Legion that took them in, but every Legion would desperately want the knowledge and battle power of two high rankers like Oracle and Rose.

However...

"Are you okay with that?" Haruyuki asked his Legion Master hoarsely. "You finally got Wakamiya back, and now you're friendly with Koshika, and yet you can't invite them to Nega Nebulus. On top of that, Wakamiya is a student at Umesato. So if she joins another Legion, you'll end up fighting. You said so yourself, right? At the end of the Territories with Oscillatory, you asked Wakamiya to leave her Legion and join Negabu. And now..."

Haruyuki ran out of words there, and Kuroyukihime stared at him with a gentle expression. But there was something in her gaze that made him feel a deep pain she was holding back.

"Of course I'm vexed," she agreed. "But given that, as a practical issue, it would be impossible to guard Megumi and Koshika twenty-four hours a day. We have no choice but to rely on the deterrence power of another Legion. This is something the three of us have already discussed and decided upon."

"..."

Haruyuki hung his head, with no words to offer in response.

Kuroyukihime, Megumi, and Tsubomi had likely talked about the plan going forward after he'd left the hospital. They could have simply told him this over mail as a decided item. But instead they'd come all the way to the Arita house to explain it to him in person. The right thing here was to accept how they felt and what they'd decided. He knew that in his head, but...

"That kind of thing," he started. "I'm sure you learned this long ago and don't need me telling you, but...ever since Wakamiya's memories as a Burst Linker came back, she's been in terrible pain. She's blamed herself this whole time for being manipulated by the White King and betraying her best friend, Kuroyukihime. Now she's finally getting past that, and her avatar was liberated from that prison in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and yet...She can't even go where she wants with all her heart to be. It's just—!"

Hot tears sprang up in his eyes as he made this argument, carried away by his passion, and dropped onto his clenched fists. Chiyuri reached out from beside him and gently patted his back. This only brought him further misery.

I'm just being an unreasonable child. Don't have a tantrum. Think. Think of a way to protect Wakamiya and Koshika from a real attack... Head still hanging, he set his brain into motion hard enough to almost

burn out the motors.

Just like Kuroyukihime said, it would be difficult to guard them twenty-four hours a day, every day. If it was just when Megumi went out, they might have been able to take shifts and stay with her, but he seriously doubted that the kind of people who would do a PK would hesitate just because Haruyuki happened to be there. And Tsubomi likely lived in Minato Ward. They definitely wouldn't be able to protect her, either. No matter how strong they were in the Accelerated World, in the real world, they were just junior high students with no money and no power.

In the real world. So what about the Accelerated World?

The objective of a PK was not the violence itself but to force a direct duel and push the player to total point loss. So if that player kept winning the duels, they could actually back their aggressor into a corner. But it was hard to stay cool when your physical body was restrained. If they could somehow jump into this direct duel...This was an absolute impossibility according to the Brain Burst rules, but Haruyuki had learned over the past six months the truth that nothing was absolute in the Accelerated World.

Right. A third-party Burst Linker couldn't get close to affecting a direct duel between two players, but *they* could.

"Koshika!" Haruyuki yanked his head up and roughly wiped away the tears in his eyes. "Um, Koshika, you're linked to the Saint Amaterasu, right?"

"Huh?" Tsubomi seemed perplexed by the sudden change in topic. "Yes, well, not so much linked. It's more like we're cooperating."

He leaned toward her. "So then could you get Amaterasu to protect you if you were attacked in the real? A Saint should be able to interfere with even a direct duel stage to a certain extent via the Highest Level. Even if she can't appear in person, she could, like, give you buffs or lend you an Enhanced Armament or something."

"What?!" Tsubomi cried out in surprise and then furrowed her brow. "Amaterasu? Mmm...I feel like she'd overlook the ethical issue if it was to resist a PK, the most taboo of taboos, but I don't know about it system-wise. I mean, with your Metatron Wings, you were in direct contact in the Mean Level of the Unlimited Neutral Field when you borrowed them, right? I wonder if it's too much for even the Four Saints to have an actual effect on a direct duel. I think the limit's about how far our voices carry."

"Ugh." This time, Haruyuki groaned.

She added another negative opinion to the pile. "To start with, I think the relationship between me and Amaterasu is just a little different than the one you have with Metatron. I said 'cooperating' a second ago, but it's really at most something like a mutually beneficial

relationship based on a contract, so I doubt she'd help me unconditionally because I was in a PK."

"M-mutually beneficial relationship?" He cocked his head. These words didn't show up very often in the Accelerated World. "That's where you each provide something to the other, right? So what specifically?"

"Information," Tsubomi told him. "Amaterasu provides information related to aspects of the Brain Burst system, and I give her information about the players, the Burst Linkers. Although we actually just make voice contact and talk about things from time to time."

"But..." Haruyuki started, a picture of the Saint Amaterasu in his mind, her elegance different from Metatron's somehow. "But when we saw you in the Highest Level before the meeting of the Seven Kings yesterday, you said you thought of Amaterasu as a friend, right? Maybe Amaterasu feels the same way?"

Tsubomi smiled almost bashfully. "That's nothing more than what I want, what I think. I have no idea what's going on in her head. After all, we're talking about a super AI who's been active for thousands of years of subjective time."

"AI..."

She was right. These "talking Beings"—aka the Saints Metatron and Amaterasu—were nothing other than artificial intelligences.

As of the present in 2047, AI technology was intimately fused with everyday life, so much so that it was impossible to tease out where it began and ended. Everything from household appliances to Neurolinker services could not exist without AI.

On the other hand, AI with high-level simulated personalities were strictly regulated by international treaties. Haruyuki and his friends had essentially no opportunities to interact with an AI that could converse on a human level. There had been some kind of AI-related incident in the late 2020s, several years before Haruyuki was born, and countries around the world had apparently taken advantage of this to enact various regulations. But he could never find any actual information on this, no matter how he scoured the net for details.

In other words, Metatron and Amaterasu, who possessed intelligence on the same—or perhaps even greater—level as Haruyuki and his friends, were clearly illegal AIs, but there was no point in getting hung up on the legality of the BB program, given that it existed only because it hacked into the social camera network. The problem before him was whether Amaterasu, a Being greater than human, would see Tsubomi as a friend and help her.

"So then let's all go and ask her!" Chiyuri's voice suddenly broke the pained silence that lingered over the dining table.

Haruyuki stared at her and slowly confirmed what she meant. "Go

ask...Amaterasu?"

"Yeah!"

"...B-but we need Metatron's help to go to the Highest Level," he protested. "And her recovery's supposed to take until tomorrow, so I can't call her..."

"What are you talking about?" Chiyuri frowned. "This is serious. You can't be all wishy-washy here; you gotta go see her! Amaterasu's house—Amano Iwato, right? If you go all the way there and ask nicely, she'll totally understand! Of course, getting Kuroyuki out of Inti comes first, though."

"..."

Haruyuki wasn't the only one briefly struck speechless. He gaped at the similarly dumbfounded Kuroyukihime and Tsubomi before turning back to his childhood friend. "So, um, Chiyu, that's easy to say, but Amano Iwato is the Tokyo Station Underground Labyrinth—one of the four Great Dungeons! Do you have any idea how hard it'd be to get to the very bottom of it?"

"Ah, come on!" Chiyuri slapped him on the back. "In the Territories the other day, you, me, and Lead cleared the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth, which is also a Great Dungeon, with just the three of us! This time, it'll be four of us. Easy-peasy!"

"What are *you* talking about?!" Haruyuki jabbed her in the side in return. "Little Tron rendered all the Enemies in the Great Dungeon inactive, right up to the middle boss! If she hadn't, it would've been completely impossible for the three of us to finish that mission. Normally, if you're thinking of going all the way to the boss room, you'd want ten—no, twenty people—"

"Not necessarily," Kuroyukihime cut in.

"...Huh?"

"The interior attribute of the four Great Dungeons is fixed, so if you're just going to the boss room, then a charge with fewer than ten people is possible if you have a lineup of duel avatars with good compatibility with that attribute. Of course, if you want to *defeat* the last boss—the Saint—you'd want eighteen people and three parties."

Why six people to a party?

Haruyuki decided to ask that question later and gave voice to a different one instead. "Um, so then what's the fixed attribute of Amano Iwato?"

"The highest fire type, the Crimson stage."

"Whoa...Higher than Volcano?"

From the lowest to highest, the nature-type fire stages were Desert, Scorched Earth, Lava, and Volcano, with the rarest and most dangerous—the Crimson stage—being above these. Haruyuki immediately frowned with all his might, and Chiyuri returned the jab

to the side.

“You’re a metal color! You’ve got fire resistance—you’re fine. But I’m vulnerable to fire!”

“Th-that’s true, but...”

Lime Bell was a green type with high basic defensive power, but perhaps because her color name came from a plant, just as she herself said, she had low resistance to fire damage. In that sense, Rose Milady, with her own plant name, would have lowered fire resistance, too, and it wasn’t like Kuroyukihime was good with high temperatures.

“With the four of us, though, it’d be tough,” he said. “At least take Shinomiya and Niko, who have high fire resistance, or Akira, to put out the fires. Pard—she can run on walls. Or Master Fuko, with her area defenses; Taku, to dig into rock; and—”

“That’s basically all of us!” Chiyuri retorted, and he closed his mouth.

Kuroyukihime chuckled. “Well, even if we can’t call in *all* our Legion members, I would like to bring a couple more on board. But... even if we were to charge the Great Dungeon, there’s still one more problem, Chiyuri.”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“Mmm. The one who will greet us in the boss room is not the true form of Koshika’s friend Amaterasu but her raging, enormous first form. The attack power will be on par with Metatron’s first form.”

“Oh...” Chiyuri shuddered slightly.

Both Chiyuri and Haruyuki understood in their bones the fearsome, ferocious nature of Metatron’s first form. In anything other than a Hell stage, she was always invisible and transparent to all types of damage, meaning she was, for all intents and purposes, invincible. So she was one of the most powerful Enemies, one of the Four Saints, and her superfast laser caused instant death with a direct hit. Of course, while her abilities and attributes would be different, there was no question that Amaterasu’s first form would be just as dangerous. And in order to make her true form appear, they would have to defeat this first form without relying on any of the stage gimmicks.

“It’s impossible, Chiyu. There’s no way. Nope,” Haruyuki said, shaking his head at top speed. “The Metatron fight the other day was a miracle. The kind of win you get after trying a hundred times and losing ninety-nine of them. Think about it. Even though it’s been eight years since the Accelerated World was created, there’s not a single Burst Linker who’s made the second form—the true form of a Saint—appear. And now it hasn’t even been a week, and you want to do it a second time. It’s just way too—”

“Crow,” Tsubomi interjected.

“...Y-yes?”

“I just remembered this, but didn’t you actually make a promise?”

“...T-to whom?”

“To Amaterasu.”

He looked around in confusion before finally remembering.

When they’d talked on the Highest Level before the meeting of the Seven Kings, he had indeed made some kind of promise—or rather, his arm had been basically twisted into making that promise. Her ancient manner of speaking came back to life in his head.

“Hear me, Silver Crow...If you would thank us, this should not be carried out in the Highest Level. Rather, you must be conscientious and make your way to our shrine. Naturally, you must not forget an offering.”

And then the previous evening, when they’d shifted to the Highest Level from Kuroyukihime’s house, Amaterasu had given Haruyuki an order.

“Since this irritating Archangel boasted endlessly about eating cake or some such, we request the same.”

“Oh...I—I did promise...to bring Amaterasu some cake.” Haruyuki nodded.

Tsubomi laughed lightly. “Then you’d best fulfill that soon. Because naturally, Amaterasu and her kind remember forever each and every word of every conversation they have with us. If you skip out on your promise and put her in a bad mood, you’ll be in real trouble. Seriously.”

He wanted to ask what she meant by that last word, but it would probably just make him more scared, so he decided to ignore it. “But if you really think about it, it’s ridiculous,” he grumbled instead. “I mean, I bring the cake like I was told and get attacked by her first form.”

“Maybe Amaterasu’s looking forward to it, just a little,” Tsubomi replied, still smiling. “Maybe she’s thinking that you’re the ones who freed Metatron’s main form from the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth, so you could also defeat her first form without any weakening gimmicks.”

“Huh?” He frowned. “But Metatron said Amaterasu’s reclusive by nature and she almost never comes out to the Highest Level.”

“That’s probably—” Tsubomi cut herself off there and shook her head slightly before continuing. “No. I won’t offer any more half-baked guesses. Amaterasu and Metatron talk just like we do, but their essential nature is something completely different from us. We probably couldn’t understand what they really want deep down.”

“...”

An impulsive argument leapt into his throat, and he opened his mouth. But no matter how he tried, he couldn’t put it into words, so

he took several shallow breaths.

Up to that point, Haruyuki had felt—no, *believed*—the exact opposite of Tsubomi. That while Metatron was a Being in the Accelerated World, she was essentially the same as a person. That she and Amaterasu had feelings, that they laughed, they cried, they even loved. But maybe that was just his own hope; maybe that was what he wanted them to be. Maybe it was just like Tsubomi said and there was an absolute separation between the artificial intelligences of Metatron and the Beings, and Haruyuki and his friends.

Even still, they should be able to close that distance. By talking, by sharing experiences, he was sure they could come to truly understand one another, even if it was only bit by bit. And for that, they really did have to free Amaterasu. From the prison of her first form, locked up in the depths of the underground labyrinth for eight thousand years.

Haruyuki took a deep breath. “We’re going. Because I made a promise to Amaterasu. When we free Kuroyukihime, we’ll take some cake and go straight to Amano Iwato.”

“All right,” Tsubomi said. “I’m sure your sword’ll be handy in Amano Iwato, too.”

After a moment’s confusion, Haruyuki realized she was talking about the fact that he’d gotten his Enhanced Armament Lucid Blade modified to nullify heat damage. And the vast sum of points needed for that enhancement had been paid by Tsubomi.

“Th-thanks so much for that...” Haruyuki lowered his head neatly, while Chiyuri leaned in the opposite direction, back against her chair.

“Hoooooowever, I mean, you going and enhancing your own sword! You were giga-lucky to find the blacksmith so fast, but now *you’re* the one going up against Inti, Haru. Well, you could just hand the sword over to Lead or Taku.”

“No, I’ll do it,” Haruyuki said immediately, uncharacteristically decisive.

“Oh!” Chiyuri slapped his back again. “What’s this? You’re way more proactive than usual. This actually makes me feel like it’s worth healing you.”

“I’m always proactive.” Haruyuki told this blatant lie and then looked across the table. Kuroyukihime looked back with her black eyes. “Kuroyukihime, we’re definitely going to rescue you from the Unlimited EK, so please just wait a little longer.”

“Mmm. I have faith in you,” she replied mildly, sounding the slightest bit vexed.

Tsubomi turned to look at the Black King. “I don’t know if I should be asking this, but...what exactly is your rescue plan? It’s been a full day already. Don’t you think you’re moving a little slowly?”

“I don’t know if I should be telling you this,” Kuroyukihime began, “but all the kings’ Legions are in total chaos. Opinions are flying back and forth, some agreeing to a joint rescue mission of the five Legions, some opposing it, some saying we should prioritize the general assault on the White Legion, and others arguing that we should do the rescue first. Apparently, they’re having trouble coming to a consensus within the Legions.”

“I see. Huh,” Tsubomi said.

“That’s...!” Haruyuki’s cry drowned out her voice. “No matter how you look at it, the rescue mission has to come first!”

“I, too, would appreciate that, but...” Ever cool, Black Lotus continued, “This is only what I’ve heard from Raker, since she’s in charge of negotiating with the other Legions, but apparently, the idea that defeating the Sun God Inti is impossible has really taken hold. In which case, rather than going up against Inti directly, they want to close in on the White Legion controlling it and make them move it from its current location. Well, I suppose the idea has a certain logic to it. All the veteran Linkers who’ve fought Inti would no doubt have the impossibility of defeating it steeped into their bones, after all.”

“...”

Now that she mentioned it, he couldn’t argue against that emotional response. When Inti fell from the sky at the meeting of the Seven Kings, Haruyuki could only flee as if death itself were chasing him. He focused on getting himself under control and thought carefully before opening his mouth. “But I really doubt Black Vise is going to just move Inti because of a general assault on Oscillatory. No matter how many points we shave away from their members, he won’t give it a second’s attention. No way. For Vise, his Legion comrades are nothing more than pawns to fulfill his objective. Otherwise...he would never have done that to Wakamiya.”

In his mind’s eye, he saw again Orchid Oracle bound to a pillar on the forty-fifth floor of Midtown Tower, chains wrapped around her. Instantly, he heard shallow breaths from across the table. He looked up and saw Tsubomi staring at a fixed spot on the table, her lips pressed together as if she were wrestling with something.

The greater mission of Oscillatory Universe.

This mission, which made even the many evil acts of Black Vise righteous, still held Tsubomi between a rock and a hard place. A moment ago, she had said she would tell them everything once she and Oracle left the Legion, but he could see an agony in those pursed lips that made him worry about whether she would really be able to.

He wanted to tell her to keep her promise and think about herself and her ward, but a second before he spoke, Kuroyukihime moved one hand and said, her voice a little tense, “Speak of the devil...a mail

from Raker. Apparently, the executive groups will meet alone to discuss the situation, no kings. Two people from each Legion will attend, and from our group, two from both Negabu and Promi are welcome. She says she wants me...to pick who..." She cocked her head.

"Um, no kings? Why is that, though?" Haruyuki asked. "I mean, if we have the usual discussion in a normal duel, you could all take part..."

"They're likely on guard against getting dragged into the Unlimited Neutral Field again," Tsubomi replied with a lilt in her voice. "This has been verified. When the Normal Duel Field is changed to the Unlimited Neutral Field via Paradigm Breakdown, Burst Linkers who didn't escape from the portal will warp to the place where their positional information remains. In other words, the kings could be shifted to inside of Inti and die instantly again. And it wouldn't be even close to anything yet in terms of points, but I think the mental damage can't be overlooked. More for the members of the executive than the kings themselves."

"Warp," Haruyuki murmured and then said to no one in particular, "So then...in the Territories two days ago, because Master Fuko disconnected with a timer in the Unlimited Neutral Field like always, she alone would warp to Fufuan and escape Snow Fairy's Brinicle. Is that it?"

"That's the basic idea," Kuroyukihime agreed. "The plan to leave normally after going to the Castle with you, Haruyuki, backfired...or perhaps not necessarily. Fufuan should have been outside the effect range of Paradigm Breakdown, so if she'd warped there, Fuko wouldn't have been able to return to the battlefield, and we might've lost."

He nodded silently. If they hadn't had Sky Raker's leadership and battle power, they probably wouldn't have been able to take control of that fierce fight. He shuddered unconsciously, while to his right, Chi Yuri cried out in astonishment.

"Warp, huh! That technique just gets more and more important sounding!"

"You've been talking like Ash today, you know," Kuroyukihime noted.

"No way! I gotta make sure I don't use that at school— Wait, no. This is about today's meeting. If the other Legions are on guard against Paradigm Breakdown, then shouldn't we tell them they don't need to worry about that anymore?"

Tsubomi shook her head sharply. "I want to keep the fact that we rescued Orkki from Midtown Tower a secret. Oscillatory will notice at some point, but I want to push it right up to the edge as far as we can."

If possible, until a means of defending Orkki against a real attack can be found.”

“And you, too, Koshika,” Haruyuki added, but Tsubomi simply shrugged.

“Don’t worry, Haruyuki.” Kuroyukihime’s voice was calm. “The safety of Koshika and Megumi is our top priority. Once I’m able to move again in the Unlimited Neutral Field, we’ll try to contact Amaterasu. As for the executive meeting today...if it’s to be two of ours, then I’ll have you and Fuko go.”

“Wh-whaaat?!” Haruyuki unconsciously cried out before alternately shaking his head and his hands. “It definitely shouldn’t be me. It should be Akira or Shinomiya! I mean, if I go, all I’ll be able to do is stand like a statue in the corner!”

“I would like to see that, but unfortunately, that’s not how it will be. Because you are the most critical Linker to the Inti attack plan.”

“Um, actually, maybe it would be better to lend Lucid Blade to someone else,” he suggested.

“You say that *now*?!” Chiyuri whacked him on the back.

“Owwww!” he yelped.

“Just a second ago, you were the cool action hero, all ‘I’ll do it!’ I’m not doing the healing if it’s not you, Haru.”

“Y-you...” Haruyuki’s eyebrows formed an inverted V on his forehead.

Tsubomi smiled for the nth time. “Crow, you’re more afraid of going to the meeting than of fighting Inti?”

“Th-that’s not exactly it,” he protested. “It’s just, scary people will be coming from the other Legions, right? Like Coba-Manga and Aster.”

“Those girls squealed and shrieked just looking at a lesser-class Being back when they’d only just reached level four. They’re not scary. Not at all.”

“Maybe from your perspective, Koshika, but...”

As the child of Saffron Blossom, one of the Originators, Rose Milady was a member of the oldest and most powerful class of Burst Linkers, with likely more experience in the Accelerated World than even Kuroyukihime. To someone like her, Aster Vine and the sisters Cobalt and Manganese might have been adorable babies, but Haruyuki had only just become a Burst Linker last fall, and he absolutely could not agree with that assessment.

That said, however...

He could probably talk with them a little about the Inti attack plan at the meeting. It was only half an hour, so he doubted they’d get to anything to do with Silver Crow, and he had to say he was anxious about the details of the plan being discussed without him. Although he would inevitably turn to stone, he did also want to hear the

conversation on the ground.

“I—I understand...I humbly accept my king’s nomination.” Haruyuki bowed his head, wrapping his right fist in his left hand.

Kuroyukihime went along with this little game with a “Mmm. Go forth with might.”

Chiyuri clapped in applause, and Tsubomi shook her head as though exasperated.

After helping clean up, the three girls left. Chiyuri looked like she was planning something, which concerned him a little, but at the moment, all Haruyuki could think about was the meeting that started at five.

He sighed before looking to the lower right of his field of view. The time was 3:50 PM. The midsummer sun was still quite bright, but the sunlight that fell on the living room floor was tinged a slight gold.

Tsubomi had said she lived in a skyscraper condo in Minami Aoyama Sancho-me in Minato Ward, and so Kuroyukihime had sent her home by taxi. *I’ll go with her!* Haruyuki had proposed, but that had been rejected with “You need to rest up for the meeting at five.”

The meeting would be held as always in Chiyoda Ward—or so he assumed, but this time, it was apparently in the neighboring Shinjuku Area No. 1. This was fairly close to Suginami Area No. 1, where Haruyuki’s house was, so he had no objections. But it was unclear as to why the other Legions had agreed to hold it in Shinjuku when that was Leonids territory.

Fuko was supposed to pick him up in her car half an hour before the start of the meeting, so he had forty minutes to wait. It was not enough time to get back into his homework, but it was too long to just sit and wait. So what was he going to do? He looked down at his own hands.

You still have far to go, Silver Crow.

Haruyuki blinked at the voice that came back to life in his head.

It was the voice he’d heard six hours earlier in Tokyo Midtown Tower when he’d charged in with Rose. The voice that had spoken to him in the moment when he’d tried to slice into the armor of the superpowerful enemy, the Legend-class Einherjar—and any number of times before that.

It was a mysterious Burst Linker, though he already knew who it was to some degree. The owner of the voice had given his name as Centaurea Sentry and said that he was the third Chrome Disaster.

With Sentry’s guidance, Haruyuki had been able to cut into Einherjar’s armor. And he was seriously grateful for that, but right before the voice had disappeared, Sentry had said something strange.

You are the lone successor to the most powerful sword technique, praised as the ultimate evil, the Omega-style Whole Blade.

“No, no, no...I don’t remember signing up to be the successor to such a sketchy sword school.” Muttering to himself, he rubbed his right hand on his shorts.

But the sensation in his palm wouldn’t go away. The feeling of a critical hit, numbing him to the top of his head, when he cut into Einherjar’s armor with Lucid Blade. The sensation of fusing with the sword, different still from the exhilarating impact when he landed a critical hit in a bare-handed fight.

He looked at the clock again. 3:55.

He let out a long sigh and then quickly went into his bedroom to change into cargo pants and a short-sleeved shirt. He put a terry-cloth handkerchief in his right pocket and wet wipes in his left and got ready to go out before returning to the living room. He sat down on the sofa, physically connected his Neurolinker with the home server, and set the cutoff timer for twenty minutes. He closed his eyes, relaxed, and said in a small voice, “Unlimited Burst.”

Skreeeeee!! The sound of acceleration pushed past Haruyuki, and his spirit flew away from his physical body.

On his second visit that day, the Unlimited Neutral Field was littered with enormous caverns, like the ruins of Cappadocia in Turkey.

His own condo had transformed into a dark-brown rocky mountain, and Haruyuki stood at the entrance to a cave in its wall. Since he was at a height equivalent to the twenty-third floor, he had a great view of the area around Koenji Station and its countless cavern ruins. At first glance, it resembled a Wasteland stage or a Weathered stage, but given the heaps of sand piled in the corners of the cave, this was...

"A Sandstorm stage, maybe?" He turned his gaze to the pale-blue sky.

The Sandstorm stage was ranked in the middle of the nature-type wind stages, and although there were no annoying gimmicks or traps, powerful sandstorms would blow up occasionally. If a player was helplessly swallowed up in one of these, it would soon devour their armor and their health gauge, and it wasn't unusual for players to die. The sky was clear at the moment, but a mere thirty seconds after the horizon started to cloud over, the storm would come crashing down, so being constantly on guard was a must.

That said, the reason he had spent ten points to come to the Unlimited Neutral Field was not to hunt Enemies. Haruyuki moved to the center of the large cavern and whirled around to look at his surroundings.

"Um." He cleared his throat. "Centaurea Sentry?"

There was no answer. He hadn't thought he'd be able to make contact that easily, so he kept calling out, raising his voice.

"Centaurea...I'm sorry, but I wanted to talk to you...Centaurea...Centaureaaaaa..."

The only sound was his own voice echoing futilely in the dim cave. He listened carefully for a minute, but he didn't hear any hint of that distinctive voice in response.

When he thought about it, it was only natural that he received no response. If Sentry hadn't lied about being the third Chrome Disaster, then he had long, long ago been subjugated by the Blue King and left

the Accelerated World.

But over the last month, it had become clear that “death” in Brain Burst was a fuzzy concept. Burst Linkers who had lost all their burst points had the BB program forcibly uninstalled and all their memories related to Brain Burst removed. This was an indisputable fact. On the other hand, however, something that might have been called the Burst Linker’s spirit remained in the Accelerated World; a ghost of their quantum circuits for accelerated thought lived forever inside the Brain Burst central server, also known as the Main Visualizer.

It freaked him out if he thought about it too hard, so he’d been trying to ignore it, but in his duel avatar as he was now, Haruyuki was not actually thinking with his own brain, apparently. The brain waves of his physical body, which was left behind in the real world, slowed to the extreme—in other words, his internal clock dropped to the minimum speed, and he was basically in a coma.

This was most likely something the majority of Burst Linkers didn’t know. The first time Haruyuki accelerated, Kuroyukihime had told him that the BB program overclocked the quantum signals emitted by his heart and raised the processing speed of his brain by a thousandfold. This had long been the accepted explanation, and many Burst Linkers likely believed it. And when the Physical Burst command was used, perhaps that really was what happened.

But the exact opposite was true when using the normal Unlimited Burst command. The physical brain didn’t accelerate; rather, it decelerated. In its place, Haruyuki and his friends thought with special quantum circuits inside the Main Visualizer. Looking at the Accelerated World like this, feeling, talking, fighting—all of it happened within these circuits, a reproduced spirit. And the instant the acceleration ended, there was a memory sync with the real brain.

This was the theory Tsubomi Koshika had explained to him, so maybe the truth lay still elsewhere. But if this theory was true, it would also explain to a certain degree Black Vise’s mysterious power of deceleration. An operation to interfere with the quantum circuit clock by forcibly manipulating the accelerated real brain to decelerate again was made possible.

And the crux of this quantum circuit theory was the fact that even after a Burst Linker lost all their points and left, that “reproduced spirit” remained inside the Main Visualizer. Indeed, Kuroyukihime had encountered the former Red King, Red Rider, inside Tokyo Midtown Tower, and Haruyuki himself had fought the ghost of Dusk Taker at the White Legion’s headquarters. In which case, the ghost of Centaurea Sentry, who had lost all his points however many years ago, should still be there, too.

“Sentry,” he called out once more before dropping his head and

sinking into thought.

So far, the only time he'd heard the man's voice was in the middle of a fierce battle—and in the middle of an extreme situation in which one blow would determine life or death. So did that mean Sentry would only contact him in that kind of situation? No. He had called himself a teacher and Haruyuki his student. If Sentry really believed that, he wouldn't put on needless airs. The reason Haruyuki couldn't hear his voice had to lie with Haruyuki and not Sentry.

It was an extreme situation.

Time always stopped when he was speaking with Sentry. Well, if it actually stopped, they wouldn't have been able to talk. It was more that Haruyuki's perception was hyper-accelerated. Accelerating beyond regular acceleration. Almost like when he shifted to the Highest Level.

"Oh!" he cried quietly.

It wasn't *almost* like—it was *exactly* that, wasn't it? Accelerated to the limit in an extreme situation, his consciousness approached the Highest Level for a mere instant, and communication with Sentry was thereby possible?

In which case, he would have to go to the Highest Level to talk to the man. But Haruyuki couldn't shift by himself; he had to call the Archangel Metatron and get her to take him there. But she was asleep at the very top of the old Tokyo Tower in Fufuan, recovering the parts of herself spent in the intense battle against Oscillatory Universe. He absolutely could not disturb her until her recovery was complete.

"Just me...going to the Highest Level..."

Saying it made him want to finish the thought with "No way; not possible; forget it." Hadn't Rose Milady said that the only Burst Linker who could shift under their own power without help from a Being was Snow Fairy?

But that also meant it wasn't impossible. Snow Fairy was a level eighter, the second of the Seven Dwarves, and a powerful player to whom Haruyuki couldn't even hold a candle, but they were still both Burst Linkers in the BB system. Whatever she could do, Haruyuki should be able to do, too, someday. Five years from now, or a year, or six months—or just maybe, now.

"Equip Lucid Blade."

A white beam of light pierced the ceiling of the cave and poured down to materialize a platinum longsword on his left hip—the simple yet beautiful design of Haruyuki's new partner. He gripped the hilt with his right hand and slowly unsheathed it.

The blade shone like a mirror, reflecting the faint light that made it inside from the mouth of the cave. The reflected light held a hint of red that hadn't been there before. Proof that an enhancement to

nullify fire damage had been carried out at the hands of the wandering blacksmith, Mr. Smith.

He gripped the longish hilt in both hands and held the blade in front of his chest in the orthodox stance.

To be honest, he had no idea how he could shift to the Highest Level under his own power. All Haruyuki could do was re-create one of the situations when he'd heard Sentry's voice.

He imagined a massive iron ball enshrined before him. Diameter of one—no, two meters. Bigger than Silver Crow was tall, the dully shining sphere sank into the rough floor of the cave. The volume of the sphere with a one-meter radius was about 4.2 m^3 , and the weight of iron was about 7.85 tons per m^3 , so doing the math gave him 33 tons, more or less. If there really had been a sphere of iron that heavy before him, it would have broken through the floor of his condo and smashed all the way to the ground—in the Accelerated World and in the real world.

Because of this aside, the power of the image started to weaken, so he imagined that the floor, too, was reinforced with thick steel plating and girders. The iron sphere once again took on a real texture. The moment he felt the traces of the polished surface, saw the slight rust here and there, and even smelled the faint scent of iron wafting around it, he brandished Lucid Blade and brought it down on the sphere.

There were no sparks or shrieks of metal on metal, but as soon as his platinum blade touched the dull curved surface, Haruyuki stopped. An imaginary shock numbed his hands, and he very nearly dropped the sword.

He took a step back and examined the iron sphere as he brought his sword back into position. There was a nick about the width of a hair in the place where he had hit it, but his own thin blade was also a little blunted. He wouldn't be able to cut the sphere like this, no matter how many times he hit it. He had to make use of Sentry's teaching and overlay the maximum on the minuscule.

The minuscule was the smallest possible point, while the maximum was a full-powered slashing attack. If he relaxed his focus even the slightest bit or tensed his arms, the logic of Sentry's sword technique—Omega-style Whole Blade—would lose its effectiveness.

Steadying his breathing, he raised his sword once more. The sphere repelled it with an intense shock. Again. Again. No matter how many blows he rained down upon it, the iron sphere continued to exist without so much as a scratch.

The root of the word *lucid* was Latin for "light," and just as the name indicated, his sword had the inherent ability to change into a laser blade, which used up an impact energy gauge set in the sword. If

he took advantage of that power, he could have melted the iron sphere, but there would have been no point in that. He had to cut it using the secret teachings of Omega style, just like when he'd defeated Einherjar.

Haruyuki soon forgot why he started doing this in the first place and simply brought his sword down again and again. At some point, he lost all sense of time. The only things that existed in the world now were the iron sphere, his beloved sword, and himself. Eventually, the sky outside the cave grew darker, and a sandstorm came along, but not even the roar that shook the cave could break his focus.

The sandstorm died down. The sun set. Night fell. Off in the distance, a large Enemy roared thunderously, and several midsize Enemies responded. A second sandstorm pushed past from the direction of Shinjuku and continued on toward Asagaya.

He slashed at the sphere at a pace of one blow every ten seconds until the number of hits exceeded one thousand, surpassed three thousand, went beyond five thousand.

And then Lucid Blade bounced back in a shower of sparks, and a little piece of the sphere snapped off. Not even noticing this impossibility becoming reality—because the two-meter iron sphere was an object that existed only within his imagination—Haruyuki made up his mind that the next blow would be the last and brandished his sword.

The place he had been intently slashing at had layers of thousands of scratches; that spot alone shone a bright silver. But overall, the sphere was essentially untouched. It stood proudly before Haruyuki, as if taunting him with its thirty-three-ton mass.

A sudden realization hit him then: Up to that point, his mind had been turned to the entirety of the enormous sphere as he swung his sword. Because for the most part, the heroes in all kinds of manga and novels always talked about “taking in the big picture” and “looking at the whole.” This way of thinking was probably best in actual battles in Brain Burst, too—if you weren't always looking at the full landscape of your opponent and the stage as a whole, you couldn't respond to a situation that constantly changed at a dizzying pace.

However, maybe the secret of Omega style was different. Not wide but narrow. See not the whole but only a single point. Narrow the focus of your mind, ever smaller. Contract it to the limit.

Whether the iron sphere was two meters across or ten or a hundred didn't matter. He needed to cut only the minuscule point where the straight line of the blade and the curve of the sphere collided—the gap of 0.1 nanometers that existed between iron atoms. Small...smaller...still smaller.

Keeeeee! He heard a high-frequency buzzing, like tinnitus. Lucid

Blade was colored with a hazy silver light.

One point.

He swung his sword. The flow of time grew sluggish. The slowly, slowly moving sword approached the iron sphere, drew nearer and nearer...

Skreeeeee!!

The sound of acceleration.

Before he knew it, Haruyuki was standing in an infinite empty space with no floor or ceiling. The iron sphere had disappeared. He lowered the sword clutched in both hands and whirled around to take in his surroundings. There was nothing nearby, but far below, an infinite number of points of light came together like the Milky Way and glittered quietly.

"...The Highest Level?" he muttered but heard no voice in reply. He sheathed his blade and looked at his hands. Depicted in tiny dots and semitransparent, they were not those of his real body but of Silver Crow's.

This was what he'd seen before in his previous visits to the Highest Level, but he couldn't immediately believe he was actually there. The twenty-minute timer he'd set for automatic disconnection was about two weeks in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Even if he were to hypothetically shift under his own power, he'd thought it would be impossible to do in three days or even a week. He never dreamed he'd manage it this fast. And then he wondered how many hours exactly he'd been swinging his sword.

At any rate, it seemed that he had indeed been able to move to the Highest Level without borrowing the power of Metatron. And he had no guarantee he'd succeed a second time. In which case, he couldn't let this chance slip away.

"Um...Cennntauuurea Sennntryyy..." His voice was swallowed by the endless darkness and disappeared without an echo.

"You called?"

"Hngaaaaah?!"

The reply came suddenly from directly behind him, so he leapt back with a shriek. He fell flat on his backside and looked up.

Standing there was a knight-style avatar, a tall figure wrapped in seamless armor. Although it was a knight, the overall look was different from the magnificent Blue Knight or the elegant Platinum Cavalier. The light armor fit snugly against the avatar's body, and there was essentially no extraneous ornamentation, so it resembled Silver Crow in terms of design direction. The face was completely covered by a helmet with a rhombus-shaped visor, and hair longer than Sky Raker's hung down to nearly its feet.

He couldn't tell what color the armor was because avatars were depicted as aggregates of infinitesimal points of light on the Highest Level. However, one thing was clear. The chest of the armor rose up and carved out a smooth arc. If this knight was Centaurea Sentry, then "he" was actually "she."

"Uh, um...Are you...Sentry, maybe?" Haruyuki asked, still sitting on the invisible ground, and the knight shrugged slightly. Her long, straight hair swung slightly, and the points of light flowed soundlessly.

"You did indeed call for my presence, yes? Why, then, such surprise?"

The gender-neutral husky voice was without a doubt the same voice that had guided Haruyuki any number of times. As he stared intently at the slender avatar, he muttered in reply, "O-oh, it's...I just totally didn't think I'd get to see you."

"You swung your sword for such long hours with no conviction?" She shook her head in what looked like exasperation and offered him her right hand. After hesitating briefly, he timidly accepted it and was yanked hard to his feet.

When he stood face-to-face with her, he saw that Centaurea Sentry was about five centimeters taller than Silver Crow. The thin scabbard equipped on her left hip also looked somewhat longer than Lucid Blade.

"Th-thank you..." He bowed and tried to take his hand back, but Sentry didn't let go. She held his hand in front of her face and examined it without a word before finally releasing it.

"Hmph. For someone who is originally a weaponless fighting type, your hand is passably suited to *yattou*."

Haruyuki knew at least that *yattou* was the general nickname for swordsmanship, but unable to grasp the actual meaning of what she said, he asked timidly, "Um...Are some avatar hands better suited to swordsmanship?"

"Most naturally. As a general rule, the macho fighting types have hands that are too thick and thus find it difficult to grasp a sword. Others are endowed with hands better suited to wielding a blade." Sentry made a C shape with one hand and clamped it open and closed.

"O-oh." Haruyuki finally understood. "I get it."

"Should they drop their sword, a sword user is at a true loss. This is a surprisingly important point. Your parent is the exception indeed. No fear of dropping her swords," Sentry said, chuckling.

Haruyuki wanted to ask if she had ever fought the Black King, but he gave up on that, since he wouldn't know what to say regardless of which of them won. After staring at his own hands for a moment, indeed quite slender for a fighting type, he lifted his gaze.

He'd looked *centaurea* up on the bus when he came back from the hospital that day, and apparently, this color name had nothing to do with the airport in Aichi that was pronounced the same way. It was actually the scientific name for cornflower. And *sentry* meant something like a guard, so a literal translation would be a "cornflower guard."

While he was at it, he looked up *cornflower* and discovered that the plant with the small blue flowers that bloomed in an arrow wheel that he'd thought was Rodgers' bronze-leaf was actually cornflower, and Rodgers' bronze-leaf was a white flower of the Saxifragaceae family, a totally different plant. *Cornflower blue* was also used to describe a shade of sapphire. If they'd met on the Mean Level or the Lowest Level, Sentry's armor would likely have shone with remarkable beauty, but unfortunately, that was not going to happen—probably.

As he chased down these thoughts, Haruyuki stood there silently, and Sentry shrugged once more.

"Silver Crow, you wished to speak with us, and thus you came all this way, yes? To ask that we haunt you no more and rest in peace, perhaps?"

"Oh, right. I—I mean, no, no. I do want to talk, but I wasn't thinking at all that you should rest in peace and go away!!" He hurried to refute the idea, but he had too many things he wanted to ask, and he couldn't sort them out in his head. He was strangely spaced-out and couldn't concentrate on the situation at hand. "I-I'm sorry. I want to talk to you about all kinds of things, but I can't really get my thoughts together."

"Well, we don't suppose you would be able to."

"Huh?"

"Are you at all aware of the number of hours you spent swinging your blade on the Mean Level?"

Posed with this question, he cocked his head. "Um. Maybe two, three hours."

"Fool." Sentry flicked his forehead lightly with her index finger. There should have been no collision detection on the Highest Level, but just like when Metatron had jabbed him in the head, he felt the phantom sensation of a sharp collision.

"Ow!"

"We, too, were not observing your efforts from their start, but we can say that the time you spent with your sphere easily surpassed ten hours. That you would continue to brandish your blade without pause for such a length of time simply because you did not shift to the Highest Level...There is perhaps something off about you."

"O-off about me?" Haruyuki started to hang his head in disappointment that his self-proclaimed master would say that after he

worked so hard to meet her, and Sentry pushed his chin up with a finger.

“Do not despair. Those were words of praise. A follower of Omega style cannot succeed unless there is something off about them.”

“F-follower?” he parroted. “So then are—were there other people besides me?”

“We made note of this earlier. That you are our sole successor. There are none other than you.”

“...Th-there aren’t?” He wondered if that meant she hadn’t found any Burst Linkers besides him who were “off” enough to have merit in Sentry’s eyes, but he decided not to pursue it. At any rate, the reason he was spacing out was apparently because he’d spent over ten hours on image training. And then he suddenly realized something. “H-huh?”

“What is it this time?”

“Um. I’m thinking with the quantum circuits inside the Main Visualizer right now, not my physical brain. So basically, it’s like an electric clone, which is kinda scary, but I feel like it’s not actually possible for my brain to get tired, whether it was ten hours or a hundred.”

“‘Kinda scary,’ hmm? There really is something off about you in a good way.” Sentry chuckled briefly and then crossed her slender arms in front of her chest. “We also do not entirely understand the logic there. Or rather, we ourselves are something along the lines of the residual thought of Centaurea Sentry, who was relieved of all her points in the distant past. The question of the logic by which we exist is mysterious, and we are not particularly eager to consider it too deeply, but we shall answer within the scope that we are able. Crow, you used the words *quantum circuit*, but are you aware of what that is specifically?”

“Huh...?” His right hand twitched, but he couldn’t look anything up online in this world. Scraping together the bits of knowledge he did have, he managed to respond, “I-it’s, um, the circuits of a quantum computer...That’s what it is. Lots of quantum gates put together.”

“Mmm, the current mainstream for quantum computers is an electron spin-type quantum circuit that makes use of an artificial diamond chip. That said, however, our knowledge base ends with the moment of total point loss. But the Brain Burst central server is different. It uses the light quantum circuits that were formerly researched and developed but then vanished at the end of the 2020s.”

“Light...quantum?”

Electrons and photons are kinda the same, aren’t they? he wondered.

As if reading his mind, Sentry shrugged a third time, arms still crossed. “We are no expert on the matter, either. We cannot explain

the details. But...it would seem that light quantum circuits are able to perform a task that electron spin circuits cannot.”

“What’s that?”

“To reproduce and save human consciousness—in other words, the soul.”

“...”

Haruyuki was overcome by the feeling that the conversation had suddenly jumped from science to the occult, and beneath his goggles, his mouth flapped open and closed. “Wait...Th-the soul?”

“This indeed sounds dubious, but think for a moment. At the present time, are you yourself nothing other than the soul reproduced from the physical body of Silver Crow?”

“...”

Now that she mentioned it, she was exactly right. What Haruyuki had said before about a quantum clone was basically defined the same way as a reproduced soul.

“S-so then the BB program uses the Neurolinker to copy my soul from my brain and save it to the light quantum circuits of the Main Visualizer...Is that it?”

“Mm-hmm.” Sentry nodded. “You had a dream the night you installed it, yes?”

“Y-yes. I forget what it was about now, but it was a really bad dream.” He shuddered slightly.

“We also dreamed. We were told the dream was the scanning process necessary to create the duel avatar. But most likely, our soul was copied over the course of the night. And the crux of all this is that the soul in the head of the physical body and the soul inside the light quantum circuits are, in principle, one and the same. Thus, when the heavy calculations continue for a long period, this places undue burden on the circuits, and you space out. This is how we understand the process to be.”

“A burden on the circuits...Can I fix it?” he asked, unconsciously touching his head.

“It can be fixed. A normal burden, that is.” Sentry’s tone was somehow different now. “But some errors are irreparable.”

“Huh?”

“The darkness produced by Incarnate— No, let us not discuss that now. We do not wish to give you any strange, preconceived notions.”

“Wh-what? But now I’m curious.”

“You did not come to the Highest Level because you wished to discuss quantum circuits, did you?”

“Oh.” Haruyuki could only bob his head up and down. “Y-yes, that’s right.” Unconsciously, he clenched his hands and looked up at Sentry’s sharp visor. “Um, I...I want to train in the sword—Omega

style. I'm not so hot on the name, but I can't forget that smooth sensation from when I cut into Einherjar's armor."

"Oh-ho-ho. Addictive, isn't it?" she asked boastfully.

He didn't want to admit it, but there was no point in trying to hide it at this stage. "Yes, very."

"When we first cut iron with the principles of the sword, we, too, vowed that we would not return to the real world until it belonged to us completely," Sentry said, shifting her gaze from Haruyuki to the sea of stardust. After briefly taking in the sight of central Tokyo depicted in countless points of light, she lifted her face. "We are willing to take on this challenge of training you. You clearly have some ways yet to go, given that a mere object such as Einherjar's armor gave you that length of trouble."

"A-a mere...? That was a Legend-class Enemy. And the first time I'd seen it..."

"Now then," Sentry continued, ignoring Haruyuki's complaints completely, "in this Highest Level, we cannot impart to you in full the principles of the sword that we have refined. There exists here not a single grain of dust to be cut. The most we would be capable of here is to speak to you of the essentials in words."

"Um, I'm okay with even that. If you could just tell me the secrets of Omega style—"

"Imbecile!" Once again, Sentry raised a hand faster than he could see and jabbed him in the forehead.

"Augh!"

"Any knowledge you acquire standing like a pole and listening will fall out of your head without a trace after the sleep of a single night. You cannot hope to absorb the true techniques without the intent and single-minded training that pains the body, combined with actual battle that hones the soul."

"Th-that's maybe true, but I can only meet you here, Sentry," he protested. "And I don't know when I'll be able to come to the Highest Level again."

"Hmph." For once, she seemed unable to argue with him. She crossed her arms and started to walk in small circles. She passed before him two, three times and then stopped on the fourth round.

"So the time has come, then, has it? Indeed, that may be the only way," the knight murmured.

Haruyuki stared at her face, almost entirely hidden by her visor. "W-will you teach me?"

"We shall. But not the principles of Omega style."

"Huh? ...Then what?"

"Our name."

And then Centaurea Sentry told Haruyuki an entirely unexpected

name and what to say when he saw its owner. Finally, she added, "From now on, you will not call us Sentry, but Maestro."

After returning from the Highest Level to the Unlimited Neutral Field and then escaping to the real world through the portal at Koenji Station, Haruyuki sank more deeply into the sofa he was sitting on. He'd only been accelerated for a dozen or so hours in subjective time, which meant that not even a minute had passed in reality. But he'd spent the whole time swinging his sword against an iron sphere, so he felt a weighty exhaustion.

When he thought about it, though, this exhaustion was strange. According to Sentry, it was the light quantum circuit in the Main Visualizer that bore the burden of the long hours of training. The brain of the flesh-and-blood Haruyuki was supposed to have been in a decelerated state—basically at a standstill. Even if his memories were synced when he burst out, it didn't make sense that even the exhaustion would be carried over.

In other words, this tiredness was an illusion, Haruyuki told himself, and used the idea to encourage his body to stand.

He still had over half an hour before Fuko came to pick him up, enough time to polish off two or three questions of his math homework. But as soon as he opened the app, he knew he couldn't focus on it. Because Centaurea Sentry's instruction—well, *command*—was terrifying in its content and incredible in its difficulty level.

"I can't. No matter how you look at it, there's just no way," he murmured as he gazed at the gray streets beyond the window, but of course, there came no reply.

"Haaah..."

A deep sigh. The whole idea weighed too heavily, but he unfortunately didn't have the option of shirking this duty. To defeat the Sun God Inti and triumph in the battle against the White Legion, he knew he absolutely had to learn Omega style.

"I'll do it. I've come this far," he said to his teacher on the Highest Level and headed toward the front door, thinking he'd kill time in the shopping center on the first floor.

The meeting was stormy.

That was only natural. Down to the last avatar, the attendees were, if one had to say, an assemblage of powerful personalities.

From the Blue Legion: Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade.

From the Green Legion: Iron Pound and Suntan Chafer.

From the Purple Legion: Aster Vine and Mauve Wire.

From the Yellow Legion: Lemon Pierrette alone.

From the Red Legion: Blood Leopard and Thistle Porcupine.

And from the Black Legion: Sky Raker and Silver Crow.

There was no reason for the merged Red and Black Legions to clash, and he didn't really know what the Yellow Legion representative was thinking. The problem was the other three Legions. It was his first time seeing the light-purple duel avatar called Mauve Wire, but he'd seen the other five warriors quarreling incessantly at previous meetings, only now there were no kings to keep them in check.

Selected for the meeting venue was the Ministry of Defense's Gijo Plaza in the southeast of Shinjuku Area No. 1. In one corner of the large space tiled in white, Haruyuki was in position beside—almost hiding behind—Sky Raker.

"Um," he murmured to his master. "We *are* going to come to a conclusion in half an hour, right?"

The timer in the upper part of his field of view had already been cut down to 1,200 seconds remaining. Even though they'd used up a third of the duel time, they had essentially decided on nothing thus far. The main reason for that was that the Green Legion was insisting on prioritizing the Inti attack and the Blue Legion the Oscillatory subjugation, and no one was willing to budge.

"You're too naïve, Pound! Why can't you see that Inti is one of Oscillatory's evil tricks?!" Cobalt Blade rebuked him.

"I'm well aware, Cobalt!" Iron Pound roared in return. "If Inti's a trap, then instead of avoiding it, we have to smash it and seize the initiative!"

This was already the third round of this refrain. Both their

arguments were logical, making it difficult for the other Legions to jump in and say anything.

“I do feel like it’s impossible in the twenty minutes that are left, hmm,” Raker replied, her voice carefree as usual.

Haruyuki responded with a long sigh.

Cobalt and Manganese’s insistence on directly attacking Oscillatory didn’t mean they had given up on the Inti attack. Although they agreed it would be possible to defeat Inti if all the Legions joined forces, they worried that Oscillatory and the Acceleration Research Society behind it would have some further trap prepared for that end.

Indeed, the possibility was not zero. At the meeting of the Seven Kings the previous day, Black Vise had repeatedly laid traps that went beyond the battle power and expectations of everyone present. The change to the Unlimited Neutral Field with Paradigm Breakdown; Argon Array’s super-massive laser attack; Wolfram Cerberus fusing with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II; the Incarnate technique Icosahedral Insulation sacrificing Vise himself; and then the Sun God Inti dropping from the sky—every single one of these traps would have been needless if Nega Nebulus hadn’t discovered and proven that the fourth of the Seven Dwarves, Ivory Tower, was in fact the Acceleration Research Society’s Black Vise.

In which case, no one could say with certainty that Inti was the final trap. If a further “something” happened when the main forces of all the Legions were in a group to free the five kings, they had to admit that the worst-case scenario—all of them in Unlimited EK—was indeed possible.

Did they avoid the folly of jumping into an unknown trap and instead attack the main body of Oscillatory? Or did they take on the challenge of subjugating Inti with the mindset of nothing ventured, nothing gained?

Nega Nebulus had something that just might be able to break the deadlock: Haruyuki’s Lucid Blade, enhanced to be immune to heat. But they had no guarantee that this hard-won rare enhancement would be able to handle an unknown trap. That was why Fuko had instructed Haruyuki before the meeting not to bring up the matter of Lucid Blade without a signal from her. But did that mean she intended to simply watch until the meeting was over?

As he was thinking this, Sky Raker rolled forward with one push on the silver wheels of her wheelchair and spoke for the first time since the greetings and introductions at the start of the meeting. “Cobalt, a minute?”

“...What is it, Raker?”

“You’re saying we should attack Oscillatory, but that’s also no easy thing in practice. Their members will naturally have cut their

global connections to the extent possible. And it's summer break, so we can't charge them via the in-school local networks. What do you think we should do about that?"

Cobalt glanced over at Manganese but didn't reply right away.

Haruyuki had met Koto Takanouchi, the person inside Cobalt, and her twin sister, Yuki Takanouchi, the person inside Manganese, five days earlier in the real world, and he felt like they were good people, even though they were the executives of a hostile Legion. In fact, they had accepted the role of observer to check the matching list after their Territories battle against Oscillatory Universe. In the end, none of the Acceleration Research Society members had been on the list, but after telling Haruyuki this, Koto had added, *"I actually think it's too bad myself. But there should still be another way. I'll be wishing Nega Nebulus success in battle."*

It hurt his heart to see them questioned by his Incarnate master, Fuko. Someone else would have eventually brought this up if she hadn't, but he nevertheless racked his brain for ideas on the twins' behalf.

To challenge someone in Brain Burst—that is, to apply for a duel—both players had to be connected to a shared network via their Neurolinkers or directly connected via XSB cable. Direct connection was out of the question, and if their opponents had cut their connection to the global network, then they would have to go via some other lower network.

The first thing that popped into his head was the in-school local network that basically all schools required their students to connect to, but since it was summer vacation, that wasn't an option. Even if they were to target the day when students came to school over the break, that was usually around August 10. Which meant that their only choice was to target the local networks of commercial facilities or event venues, but if they went around and checked every single one of those, the attacking side would end up drained of burst points first.

Of course, it was hard to block the global net forever. More than half the Neurolinker functions would be dead, so at some point, even the members of Oscillatory would start to connect to the net like fish gasping for breath out of water. But that was a month or maybe two months away.

"There is...a way," Manganese Blade said, her ponytail-shaped adornment swinging. Fuko cocked her head silently and waited for the details. "Even if Oscillatory members have the mental strength to stay off the global net, they wouldn't abandon their king. If we keep attacking White Cosmos and pushing her total points down, even if we lose over and over, the members will eventually appear on the matching list, and that includes the Seven Dwarves."

The meeting attendees murmured quietly in response.

The next to speak was Aster Vine of the Purple Legion. As she brandished her military-cap-shaped helmet high, her voice was taut as a whip. “Attack Cosmos—that in itself is a mean feat. The White King hasn’t appeared on the battlefield for some years now. Neither on the Normal Duel Field, nor the Territories. How do you intend to draw her out onto the matching list?”

“There’s no need to draw her out,” Manganese replied.

“We went to Minato Ward Area Three today to confirm,” Cobalt continued. “There are no Oscillatory *member* names on the matching list, but the master’s—White Cosmos’s—name was there. Transient Eternity has no intention of blocking her connection to the global net.”

Once again, Gijo Plaza was filled with hushed chatter. Iron Pound groaned, “Seriously?” Thistle Porcupine snarled, “She’s totally sneering at us,” and Aster Vine kicked at the stone tiling with her heel.

Blood Leopard stepped forward fluidly. “In which case, *that* is the trap,” she declared before looking at the twins with her feline eyes. “Did you challenge the White King?”

Both members of Dualis sharply shook their heads.

“No,” Cobalt said. “It’s true—it was simply too suspicious. We couldn’t.”

“But even supposing it were a trap,” Manganese continued immediately, “the things she can do in a normal duel are limited. At the very worst, we lose and go down a few points. Even the White King’s a person—if a number of us keep charging her, she’ll get tired at some point and stop being able to fight properly.”

“Wouldn’t she for sure disappear from the matching list, then, before that happened?” Pound challenged.

“No,” Raker responded. “No matter how much she is challenged, the White King will likely not block the global net. If her name is on the list now, then it’s surely a challenge to the other kings—and to the Black King in particular. In August three years ago, Lotus blocked the global net for two years and hid from the kings’ assassins. It was the natural choice, but the White King would assert that she has no such need. She’s inviting the other kings to challenge her. She’s saying she refuses to run or hide.”

“The kings directly?!” Aster Vine cried in a sharp voice. “They would never! If level niners fight, the loser drops to zero points immediately!”

“Cosmos is well aware of that. She’s putting out this challenge with full knowledge that it would mean the end if she lost,” Raker insisted. “In other words, she’s confident that even if the kings challenged her one after the other, she would not lose. And she has

good reason for that confidence. Cobalt, did you tell the Blue King that Cosmos was on the matching list?"

She shook her head. "No, not yet. We were planning to report it to him once the meeting was over, together with our results here."

"You'd best not tell him," Raker advised. "Given Knight's personality, he might even go to fight Cosmos tonight. You both know what he's like when that switch flips, yes?"

What he's like? Haruyuki cocked his head, but no one explained.

Aqua Current lowered her face, and Manganese said quietly, "Indeed. But we can't hide the fact that the alliance of the six Legions will be carrying out its general attack on Cosmos alone. And once he hears about that, the king will definitely insist on joining the mission. When all is said and done...this means we can't touch Cosmos—or Oscillatory."

Manganese gripped the hilt of the greatsword on her left hip, and for a while, no one said anything. Even Pound, who had been so firm in his opposition, kept his mouth shut and his arms crossed.

In this silence, when the remaining time had dropped to ten minutes, a gaudy balance ball rolled toward the center of the venue. Atop it deftly balanced a small F-type avatar clad in a pale-yellow minidress-type armor. This was the sole participant from the Yellow Legion, Crypt Cosmic Circus: Lemon Pierrette.

The actual younger sister of the Yellow King, Yellow Radio, she had also been at the meeting of the Seven Kings the previous day. Haruyuki had never had the chance to speak with her himself, but during that meeting, she had only repeated the last bit of whatever Radio said; he had no memory of her expressing her own ideas. But Radio wasn't at this meeting. So then what on earth was she going to say? He held his breath.

"What is the finish line you all are aiming for?" Pierrette asked with a youthful voice, swinging about with a jester's hat on her head, though it wasn't quite as large as her brother's.

"Finish...line?" Cobalt asked, baffled.

"Yes." Pierrette nodded languidly. "Is it enough to free the kings held captive inside the Sun God Inti? Is crushing the White Legion the end goal? Or are you thinking about something further in the future than either of these things?"

"Well, obviously, it won't end with simply freeing the kings," Manganese answered, almost groaning. "The White Legion is a front for the Acceleration Research Society, and they've committed any number of terrible deeds. If we let them off here, who knows what mess they'll make next. Total point loss for all members—well, I won't go that far, but the bare minimum required here is the disbanding of the Legion and the seizing of their territory."

“We’re in agreement there,” Pound said, and Suntan Chafer to the rear also nodded silently. “Unless we draw a clear line in the sand with Oscillatory and the Society, we won’t have a leg to stand on in front of all the players who ended up in total point loss because of the Armor of Catastrophe and the ISS kits.”

“Then it’s not such a big problem whether the rescue or the attack is first.” Pierrette gently spread out her hands, still sitting on the ball. “We have to do both anyway, so we should think about the possibility of a trap later and start whichever’s easiest to commence immediately.”

At the previous day’s meeting, Pierrette had essentially been a mascot, but now her logical, big-picture opinion briefly left the other participants at a loss for words.

Finally, Raker cleared her throat lightly before saying, “Setting aside the actual difficulty, if we’re talking about which is easier to start, that’s likely the Inti mission. There are fewer uncertainties there than with Cosmos herself. We also have a lot of information, so coming up with a strategy would be easier.”

“You say that, Raker, but...” Chafer stepped forward, her dark-brown armor clanking. “We can’t devise a strategy with that information. It’s immune to physical attacks and immune to attribute attacks, and on top of that, we can’t even get near it. I’m pretty sure all the Legions here have talked about this until they were blue in the face. But even supposing we *could* hit it, the only thing we can really do is pull together all of our long-distance types and go for a bombardment from afar, right?”

“That’s also a wonderful plan,” Raker said smoothly. “But I don’t feel like a saturation of long-distance attacks will be able to blow out Inti’s flames. Personally, I think the better possibility is to add as many buffs as possible to one close-range type and have them charge in.”

“Ha-ha!” Pound laughed out loud before quickly checking himself, raising his boxing-gloved hand, and apologizing. “Sorry. This is no laughing matter, but that’s just so Strong Arm. Raker, I like your strategy better, but the practical issue there is, no one’s gonna volunteer for the role of attacker, y’know? And we can’t force that job on anyone. One wrong step, and they’ll be in Unlimited EK, too.”

“Goodness, I do wish you wouldn’t think so little of us, Fists.” She smiled coolly. “If we didn’t have a volunteer, I wouldn’t have brought up such a strategy.”

I kinda don’t like the way this is going, Haruyuki murmured to himself as he tried to inch away from Fuko.

Across from them, Pound threw his hands into the air. “Whoa, whoa, you can’t have already decided on the attacker, can you? If

we're talking fire resistance in Negabu, that'd be Ardor Maiden, but are you really gonna make a good kid like that go on a suicide charge?"

"Of course not." Raker sniffed. "Avatar fire resistance is no match for something like Inti's flames."

"So then who—?" Pound cut himself off, lifted his face, and looked at Haruyuki.

And then everyone in the venue also turned their gazes on him.

Haruyuki tried to run away, but being part of the Gallery, even that was denied to him.

"M-M-Master! How could you say that so casually?!" Haruyuki yelped from the passenger seat of the car parked in a lot near the Ministry of Defense.

Fuko, in the driver's seat, offered a smile in return. "They were going to find out tomorrow anyway, Corvus. Don't you think it's better to tell them in advance than announce it in front of over a hundred Burst Linkers on the scene?"

"W-well, that's maybe true. But I wasn't ready," he grumbled.

"Also, you were the one who decided to enhance your own Lucid Blade instead of Lead's Infinity, weren't you?" Fuko pinched his cheek. "I'm a little peeved myself."

"Huh?" He looked up at her. "Peeved? You are, Master? Why?"

"I was thinking it was about time to have you train in the penetrating blow ability," Fuko said, tugging on the bit of his cheek trapped between her fingers. "But since you took Lucid Blade as your level-up bonus, I suppose you'll be devoting yourself to the sword now, hmm?"

Haruyuki was dumbfounded. "N-no, no, I'm totally not going to focus on my sword!" He shook his head rapidly. "I mean, in the Territories yesterday, I was fighting bare-handed the whole time. And...your penetrating hit is too amazing, Master Fuko. I don't feel like I could even begin to learn it!"

In the fight the previous day, Sky Raker had taken down Shadow Cloaker, who was guarding Argon Array of the Acceleration Research Society, in a mere two blows. The palm strike to the chest was one thing, but the killing blow—it may have *looked* like her hands were only wedged up against the sides of his helmet, but Cloaker's head had shattered like it had been ripped apart from inside. It seemed impossible that Haruyuki could ever learn this technique when he couldn't even begin to imagine what logic would give birth to that kind of force.



But Fuko finally released his cheek and patted his shoulder with her now-free hand as she said with a smile, "It's all a matter of training. If you lock yourself up in the Unlimited Neutral Field for a while, you'll be able to awaken it at some point, Corvus. Simply throwing punches isn't hand-to-hand fighting now, is it?"

"Well, if I could use that ability, I *would* have a bigger range of techniques for when I'm fighting someone with hard armor like Pound..."

The problem was that the "locking himself up for a while" she spoke of was not going to be on the order of a few days or even a week. He needed to get back to the topic at hand before she said something about this being a good opportunity, so why didn't they just head into the Unlimited Neutral Field.

"A-anyway." Haruyuki frantically flapped his lips. "I'm totally not interested in becoming some sword master. I only enhanced Lucid Blade because there wasn't enough time to get Lead. I still think of you as my master..."

Here he cut himself off awkwardly. It was true that the only one Haruyuki had called master was Sky Raker. But right now, there was another Burst Linker he had to call instructor: the mysterious user of the Omega-style Whole Blade, Centaurea Sentry.

I can't tell her yet!

Fuko looked at him suspiciously, but a gentle smile quickly rose on her face. "Well, right now, rescuing Lotus is our top priority. The mission starts tomorrow at five in the morning, so you should get to bed early. No staying up all night."

"R-right. But when I think I *have* to go to sleep, I end up not being able to fall asleep..."

"Hee-hee. That's very like you, Corvus. If you simply can't get to sleep, dive call me. I'll sing you lullabies until you drift off." She patted his cheek as she spoke, and he couldn't tell just how serious she was. Before he could say anything, she pulled her hand away and gripped the steering wheel. "Now, shall we head home? It's okay if I take you straight back to your house?"

"Yes—," he started to agree, then remembered that he had just one more mission to clear. "N-no! Um, could you let me off at K-Kansenen Park? I know it's kind of out of the way, but..."

"Kansenen Park? Where's that?" Fuko cocked her head and brought up an area map on the front windshield. After she input the destination with a voice command, a red mark flashed in between the Toden Arakawa Line's Omokagebashi and Waseda Stations. "Well! It's not even three kilometers away. Of course that's fine. But what do you have to do in a place like that? Does it involve the Accelerated

World?"

"Uh...Um, uh...uhhh..." He knew that the fact that he was totally stuck for what to say was basically the same as saying yes, but he still couldn't find any words in his empty head.

Fuko giggled. "You're level six now, Corvus, so I know you have things you can't talk about. I'm sure Sacchi would force a confession out of you, but I'm nice, so I won't ask. But...don't do anything dangerous."

"N-no! I won't!" Haruyuki assured her, and Fuko pushed the point home with "That's a promise" before pulling out of the lot.

Although it was a weekday evening, the roads were surprisingly clear, and the trip didn't take even ten minutes. Fuko let Haruyuki off on the sidewalk of Shinmejiro-dori on the north side of Kansenen Park, and he let out a short sigh after watching the taillights of the Italian car fade as it drove off.

So many things had happened that day—or rather, since the previous evening. He woke up at Kuroyukihime's house, met Tsubomi Koshika in the Sasazuka Library, moved to the hospital in Setagaya, and set Megumi Wakamiya free. And when he returned to his own house at last and was doing his homework, Kuroyukihime, Tsubomi, and Chiyuri came over; he spoke with Centaurea Sentry on the Highest Level; and then in the evening, he attended the Legion alliance meeting in Ichigaya with Fuko. His days had been dizzying since the start of July, but this was probably the first time so many events had overlapped like this.

Now, however, he had one last mission to carry out.

The time was 5:15 PM. He glanced up at the sky, which was now finally taking on the color of dusk, before launching his navigation app to display a route to the address he'd input before he left home. Kansenen Park was just a landmark; his true destination was about three hundred meters to the north.

When he crossed Shinmejiro-dori at the nearest light and walked over the narrow bridge that spanned the Kanda River, the scene around him abruptly transformed into a residential area. He followed the navigation and kept walking in between houses and low-level condos until a small playground came into view. His destination was the seven-floor condo on the other side.

He'd input the unit number into the app, but he couldn't exactly ring the bell out of the blue. The instructions he'd been given were to thoroughly memorize the appearance of the condo and its surroundings and to confirm the name on the postbox.

The condo with its white-tiled floor was not brand new, but it wasn't old, either; it looked to have been built maybe ten years ago.

The plants in front of the entrance were well kept and made the area feel fresh and cool in combination with the green of the park beyond it. In fact, when he drew closer, the oppressive heat seemed to ease just a bit.

Stopping for a moment in front of the condo, Haruyuki told himself that it wasn't a crime to just go inside, and he forced his feet forward. When he slipped through the automatic door, the intercom was to his left and postboxes and delivery shelves to his right, just like he'd been told they would be. He stepped up to the postboxes and looked for the tag 505. The last name inscribed there was Suzukawa.

They didn't move! he shouted in a corner of his heart and then turned on his heel. Fortunately, he was able to leave the premises without running into any residents or the supervisor. He went to the playground on the other side of the road and drank some barley tea from the water bottle he'd brought.

Although it was summer break, there were no children on the playground, maybe because it was already after five. Two elderly people were resting on a bench below a wisteria trellis farther back, but he figured they wouldn't yell at him, so he looked up once more at the white condo building beyond the plants.

Until about twenty years ago, it had apparently been possible to check the area around most roads on online map services. But a law enacted a little before Haruyuki was born concentrated all information related to security guarantees and preserving public order in the Social Security Service Center, and access for the general public was prohibited. Thus, to memorize the appearance of the condo, his only choice was to actually come here and look at it.

"What good is it going to do to memorize the look of the building?" Haruyuki grumbled quietly as he wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

The final objective of this mission was to contact in the flesh the person who was meant to be living in No. 505. But not knowing anything other than their name, and given that it was summer break on top of that, it wasn't going to be that easy. He couldn't make assumptions about what time they would leave the house, so he would need to stake the place out for a long time. He only came today to do the groundwork for that stakeout, but instead of memorizing the look of the building, wouldn't he be better off looking for a spot from which to monitor the entrance?

"Well, no matter which way you look at it, this park's the only place," he muttered.

On the right side of the condo was another condo, and on the left was a house, and he couldn't go in there. The road was fairly narrow, too, so if he just stood to one side, people would start to raise their

eyebrows, even if he was just a kid. All that was left was this park, but it would have little kids playing in it during the day. If he couldn't produce a reason why it was not unnatural for him to be there for long hours, someone would call the police.

"I'm observing birds and bugs for my summer research project," he suggested to himself. "But then they'd probably tell me to go to Kansenen Park or Hosokawa Garden. I'm meeting someone here? But that's, like, thirty minutes, tops."

As he pondered the problem, he looked up at the condo in question. And then from either side of the road that separated it from him, he sensed people moving this way. Approaching from the right was an old lady rolling a wheeled shopping bag. From the left were three girls in gym clothes, looking like they were on their way home from practice.

He'd scouted the condo plenty, so he decided to leave before he met anyone's eyes and got weird looks. He started to head for the exit on the opposite side of the park.

However...

"...?!" About to turn around, he froze and faced forward. From a gap in the vegetation, he stared hard enough at the girls to burn a hole through them.

Naturally, Haruyuki had never seen the girl with the short hair walking on the left or the girl with her hair up in buns in the center. But the face of the tallest girl, who had long hair and was walking on the right, jolted his memory. It was the image that had flowed directly into his head an hour or so ago on the Highest Level except it was aged three years.

It was her. There was no mistake.

He was 100 percent certain, but then what should he do? Say nothing and watch her go and wait for his chance another day? No, he didn't know when the next time he'd be able to run into her would be. And the Inti mission was at five the next morning—in other words, a mere twelve hours away. In which case, he couldn't let this good fortune slip through his fingers.

But...

Just remembering what he was supposed to say made his palms slick with a cold sweat. The height of this hurdle was the same as or even higher than when Kuroyukihime had told him to direct-link with her last fall in the Umesato Junior High cafeteria lounge.

While he was frozen in place, the girls steadily approached. Their shadows in the evening sun already stretched out in front of the park. The old woman with the rolling bag passed by the vegetation first. Perhaps they knew her; the three girls stopped and said hello, then started walking once more. They were not even ten meters away from

the condo entrance.

If Haruyuki's hunch was right, the girl with the long hair would go into the condo, open the front door, and get in the elevator. If she did, contact would no longer be possible. He didn't know if the other two girls lived here, too, or if they just went in the same direction to go home, but either way, there was no moment when his target would be alone.

You just have to go. Go!!

He hit his stiff legs with his fist and took a step forward. With a gait that was basically falling forward, he stepped out of the park and onto the road in front of the three girls.

"Uh...Um!" A pathetically hoarse voice came from his mouth, but even so, the girls stopped and stared at him.

Haruyuki knew that the girl with the long hair was in tenth grade right now. In which case, the other two probably were, too. But it didn't make much difference at this point whether they were older or younger.

All three had looks on their faces that were 80 percent confused and 20 percent on guard as they waited for him to continue. From his basically empty head, he managed to pull out the necessary information and turn it into sound.

"Um. You're Seri Suzukawa, right?"

The instant Haruyuki uttered the name, the guardedness displayed on their faces rose to nearly 50 percent. The girl with the long hair whose name had been called retreated half a step and raised a hand as if to protect herself, but she still answered him.

"I'm Suzukawa...Who are you?"

The voice was low for a woman, with a slightly androgynous edge, definitely similar to *hers*—the avatar who had given Haruyuki this task. And there was something about the almond-shaped eyes, sharp eyebrows, and small mouth that made him feel like the face mask hidden by Sentry's visor was something like this.

Firming his resolve, Haruyuki introduced himself. "M-my name is Haruyuki Arita. I'm in eighth grade at Umesato Junior High."

"Arita?" She frowned. "Have we met somewhere?"

He desperately wanted to say yes, but Seri had no memory of that. Shaking his head quickly, he replied, "No. We've never met. But I know you."

Here, the girl in the center spoke. "Are you...saying you're a stalker?!"

"There's a social camera right there," the girl on the left said in a thorny voice. "If you do anything weird, the police'll be here in no time!"

There was indeed a familiar black ball on the metal pole she

pointed at. The AI analyzing the feed in real time might have already detected an abnormality in this situation. But he couldn't pull back now.

"I-I'm not a stalker! This is the first time I've been in this area and the first time I've seen Suzukawa," he explained desperately, but the girls remained deeply wary. If someone passed by now, the whole situation would go even more pear-shaped.

"So then what do you want?" Seri asked finally.

Haruyuki took a few seconds before replying with his prepared answer. "I—I got a request from a certain person. They wanted me to come see you."

"A certain person? Who?"

You! The word started to fly out of his throat, and he just barely held it back. If he actually said that, the girls' on-guard meter would blow right through the top. He swallowed to wet his desert-dry throat and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I can't say their name. But I can explain the reason I came."



“What reason?”

“I can’t tell you in words. Please. Will you...?” He pulled a two-meter XSB cable from the side pocket of his cargo pants and held out a plug. “Will you d-direct with me?”

Instantly, Seri’s eyes grew wide, and the jaws of the other two dropped.

If Haruyuki was forced to say, it was the height of absurdity, but the assumption that young people directing in a park were lovers was still rampant in this world. Most likely, the three of them probably thought he was making up some story about being asked by someone just to have an excuse to confess his love to Seri. Even imagining this made him want to run away screaming, but if he did, he’d never be able to speak to her again. He continued to hold out the plug with a trembling hand.

A laugh she tried to hold back slipped out, and Seri immediately covered her mouth with one hand. She touched a sky-blue barrette in her hair with the same hand before saying in a slightly softer voice, “Arita, I basically get that you’re not dangerous or anything. But sorry, I can’t actually direct with someone I just met.”

Of course you can’t, he agreed in his heart, but he couldn’t pull the plug now. “Please. There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Tell me? What, then?”

After gulping hard again, Haruyuki told her the words Sentry had instructed him to say. “Ever since you were in elementary school, you’ve been trying to remember something, but you can’t.”

Instantly, the look on Seri’s face changed dramatically. Her eyes grew even wider, and she pressed her hands to her mouth. She took one step back, then another, and shook her head several times as if in disbelief.

Noticing the change in their friend, the other two stepped forward and started shouting sharply.

“Hey! You can’t just go saying stuff like that!!”

“How would a junior high kid know about what Seri was thinking in elementary?!”

He couldn’t help but flinch at two high schoolers yelling at him, but Seri approached and turned to her friends.

“Kana, Shima. I want to hear what he has to say.”

“Huh? But, Seri...” The friend with the hair buns looked worried, but Seri nodded firmly at her.

“It’s okay. I promise I’ll explain later, so you two go on ahead.”

“If you say so, Seri, then we will.” The friend with the short hair tugged on the sleeve of Buns’s sweatshirt. They both stared hard at

Haruyuki once more before saying to their friend, "Call us tonight, okay?!" and continued east down the road.

Once they'd disappeared around the bend, Haruyuki said to Seri exactly what he was thinking: "Your friends really trust you."

"That's what friendship's about," she declared without hesitation and then looked around and pointed to the park where Haruyuki had been lurking until a few minutes earlier. "There okay?"

"S-sure, anywhere's fine..."

Seri nodded and grabbed the gym bag on her shoulder in her right hand before walking toward the park entrance. Haruyuki chased after the black hair swinging against her slender back and entered the playground for the second time. At some point, the elderly people under the wisteria had disappeared. Seri walked over to that very bench, set down her bag, and looked back at him.

"So what's the thing I can't remember?" She stared hard at Haruyuki, a hint of guardedness lingering on her face, but now there was also a longing she couldn't hide. Or so it seemed. Or else that was just him projecting his own hopes. He'd know soon enough.

He offered her the plug in his hand again. After a brief moment of hesitation, she accepted it. The Neurolinker around her neck was the same blue as the long, slender barrettes shining on both sides of her head. She took a deep breath and connected the noncontact plug to her Neurolinker.

When Haruyuki connected the other end of the cable, a wired connection warning floated up in the center of his field of view. The instant that was gone, he called out quietly, "Unlimited Burst."

Skreeeeee!! The cold, dry roar of thunder made the world stop.

The wisteria above him, the evening sky beyond it, Seri Suzukawa in front of him—all were dyed the same transparent blue. This was the initial acceleration space, also known as the Blue World. A silent place connecting the real world with the Normal Duel Field.

Haruyuki jumped out of his frozen body in the form of his pink pig avatar, bounced once on the ground, and then righted himself and looked up at Seri.

If she were a Burst Linker, she would appear in a general-use avatar like he had. But even after a few seconds, there was no sign of an avatar splitting from Seri, frozen with a dubious look on her face. This was all exactly as expected. Now it was just a matter of whether or not he could carry out the last of his instructions.

"There's no need to shift completely. It's enough to connect with the Highest Level for a mere instant."

That's what Centaurea Sentry had told him a little over an hour earlier. But was that even possible? To shift from just the Mean Level of the Unlimited Neutral Field to the Highest Level, he'd needed to

push his powers of concentration to the limit and swing a sword for over ten hours. And this was the initial acceleration space, even lower than the Lowest Level of the Normal Duel Field. Perception-wise, it was basically the real world.

“What am I supposed to do now?” he grumbled in the general direction of the world that proclaimed itself to be the highest and greatest, but he couldn’t exactly give up before he’d even started.

In terms of the logic, if he could do what he did with his attack on the imagined iron sphere in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he could connect with the Highest Level even from way down here...maybe. But he was only allowed to dive into this initial acceleration space for a mere thirty minutes. He didn’t have the luxury of swinging a sword for hours on end. And to start with, he wasn’t Silver Crow at the moment. He was just a squat little pig avatar.

Nonetheless, he had no choice but to try. For the sake of Centaurea Sentry and for Seri Suzukawa.

In the frozen blue world, Haruyuki readied his black-hooved hand at his hip. The key to connecting with the Highest Level under his own power was most likely ultimate focus. When he’d heard Centaurea Sentry’s voice during his battles with Glacier Behemoth and Einherjar, it had been in a span of time that didn’t fill even one tenth of a second; his thoughts had been racing, compressed to a superhigh density. When he was slicing at his imagined iron sphere, he’d been so deeply fused with his sword that he’d lost all sense of time. There were differences in the direction of his focus, but there was no doubt that they both placed an excessive burden on the quantum circuits set aside for his use. This burden brought about some kind of exceptional phenomenon and connected his consciousness to the Highest Level. Theoretically.

He should be able to do the same thing even in this initial acceleration space, because time was accelerated by a thousand here as well. Which meant he wasn’t thinking with the brain of his real self frozen behind him but the quantum circuits in the BB system instead.

Ultimate focus.

A state of mind he could not reach without an extreme situation, literally life or death, or an image polished over the course of dozens of hours. But now he somehow had to get there within thirty minutes. The 1.8 seconds that would pass in the real world during those thirty minutes were more than enough for Seri to suspect something was up. He’d best assume that accelerating a second time would be impossible.

Focus.

His hand still at the ready, Haruyuki walked over to the wisteria lattice. In the real world, it was sun-faded wood, but in the initial acceleration space, it was blue and transparent like glass. It would

detect the collision but would be impossible to break. He looked at a single point on this pillar and worked on an image of smashing it with one blow. One blow, one blow...one blow.

"Haaah!" Since no one could hear him, he freely unleashed a battle cry and launched a right punch. His clenched hoof hit the pillar, and there was a sad little *pok* sound. Naturally, the pillar didn't break. But for a mere instant, he felt the speed of his fist go past the limit. Almost like he was punching through the world itself...

Krrk!

He heard the sound of something ripping. And then a flood of information poured into Haruyuki through the break and flowed into Seri Suzukawa's Neurolinker through the cable that connected them. It was no hallucination; he could actually see the transmission as a stream shining white in the air.

He waited a full ten seconds after the light cut out and then ever so timidly said, "Burst Out."

The frozen blue world gradually took on its original colors again. His pig avatar vanished from his terminal, and his consciousness returned to his physical body. The chorus of cicadas that filled the park, the noise of the cars on Shinmejiro-dori, the footfalls of the children running along the small adjacent street—feeling these environmental sounds pushing in on him suddenly, Haruyuki stared at Seri Suzukawa's face hard enough to burn a hole in it.

Seri had closed her eyes at some point. Beneath her shortish bangs, her long eyelashes twitched. Her upright body shuddered, and her head was thrown back slightly.

He worried he would have to hold her up if she leaned too far back. But there was no need for that: After one large final shudder ran through her body, Seri's eyes snapped open so forcefully, he could practically hear the *pop*.

The gaze that was turned toward the evening sky slowly settled on Haruyuki. She moved a hand in front of her face and blinked several times before she spoke, her voice sounding somewhat more powerful than before they started directing.

"Basically, all my memories have been synced."

"Huh?" He gaped. "Uh? What do you...?"

"It means I remember," she told him. "The fact that I was a Burst Linker...Centaurea Sentry."

"...!"

Haruyuki gasped and froze in place, while Seri looked at him, her face serious for a moment. Finally, her small lips curled into a faint but warm smile.

"Good job, Arita—well, Silver Crow. To be honest, I thought this didn't even have a ten percent chance of succeeding. I figured it was

more likely I'd think you were a weirdo and report you to the police."

"Th-that's awful!" he cried out before staring at her. "B-but are you really Sentry?"

"You don't believe me?"

"It's just—you talk totally differently..."

"And if we were to speak in this manner, you would believe?" She abruptly switched to an old-timey manner of speech, and her smile turned wry as she continued. "We may speak in this fashion here as well, but it's a bit much for a high school girl to use that kind of archaic speech. In the real, I'm quiet and talk like a normal person."

She neatly returned to her original tone halfway through, and Haruyuki was basically at his wits' end.

"I—I believe you," he said finally. "But...why do you talk like that over there anyway?"

"In the early Accelerated World, there were tons of places where people would look down on you just because you were an F-type."

"Th-there were? Uhhh, I dunno. It's like...", he started. "You said you synched your memories, but then what happened to the personality of Suzukawa from a minute ago?"

"It's not like it disappeared," she replied as she removed the plug from her Neurolinker and returned it to him. She pushed her gym bag off to one side of the bench and urged him to sit with a gesture.

After winding up the XSB cable and returning it to his pocket, Haruyuki sat down. She took a seat beside him and stared at her hands for a minute before speaking.

"I lost all my points in the third term of sixth grade, and I went through junior high having totally forgotten about the Accelerated World. The three and a half years of memories I've lived through since then, up to where I am in tenth grade today, are still there inside me. But at the same time, I've also got the memories of Centaurea Sentry, who woke up every so often while she dozed in the Main Visualizer and meditated on things. It's not like my personality's changed...I guess it feels like waking up from a dream. A peaceful, happy dream but one that's not quite enough somehow."

"..."

Haruyuki didn't know what to say at first. And it was no wonder. Seri Suzukawa/Centaurea Sentry next to him had smashed the most critical rule of Brain Burst, total point loss = forced uninstallation = permanent banishment. The second survivor after Megumi Wakamiya. And Seri had been able to get her memories back basically on her own, without borrowing the power of the White King.

He had absolutely no idea how she'd done it, but if others who had lost all their points could do the same, it would turn the Accelerated World on its head. Even Red Rider, pushed to total point

loss in a surprise attack from Kuroyukihime (who still blamed herself for it), might have been able to truly come back to life.

But unable to broach this subject, Haruyuki instead asked something totally unrelated. “Seri, what team are you on?”

“Maestro.”

“Huh?”

“I told you on the other side, didn’t I? Call me Maestro. If that’s not your style, I guess I could also accept Master.”

“...S-so then, Maestro, what team...?” he asked again.

Seri yanked her right foot up. “Soccer.”

“S-soccer?!”

“Why are you so surprised?”

“O-oh,” he said. “I just assumed it’d be kendo...”

“Because I started soccer in junior high,” she half muttered, lowered her foot, and looked up at the wisteria that doubled as a roof above their heads. It was already the end of July, so the flowers had long since dropped, but through the gaps in the lushly growing leaves, the evening sky shone bright orange like it was on fire.

“Ever since I stopped being a Burst Linker, I’ve carried this emptiness inside me. Always trying to remember, never being able to... There was constantly this empty space that I could never seem to fill. When I started junior high, Kana and Shima—the girls I was with before—invited me to join the girls’ soccer team. I really threw myself into it, but still, the empty space never went away.”

Seri’s words made him realize all over again how cruel Brain Burst was. It could steal your memories, but it couldn’t fill in the hole left in the place they used to be. If all the Burst Linkers who had lost their points so far felt this same emptiness, then it was like some kind of unbreakable curse.

“Have you known any Burst Linkers who lost all their points?” she suddenly asked him.

He looked at her before nodding, almost hanging his head. “Yes. I...pushed him to total point loss. In a sudden-death duel with all our points on the line.”

The Twilight Marauder aka Dusk Taker aka Seiji Nomi. Haruyuki hadn’t been able to avoid this final battle with the other Burst Linker. He didn’t regret striking the final blow when Nomi had begged desperately for his life, pushed to the edge with just a few pixels remaining in his health gauge.

Even so.

“Once he lost all his points, he was like a different person. He got serious and worked hard in school and at practice,” Haruyuki told her. “But does he actually feel the same as you? Has he been going around with this unfillable hole all this time?”

"I don't know," Seri said softly, her long hair swinging to the side. "I've never seen a Burst Linker who lost all their points in the real. I've pushed more than a few to that state, though."

"M-more than...a few?"

"That's why they used to call me Ruthless. Or Asura. Even though I was given the avatar name Sentry, I never protected anyone."

"But..." He looked at her face once more and said earnestly, "But you protected me a bunch of times. If you hadn't been giving me advice, I couldn't have beaten Glacier Behemoth or Einherjar."

"I was just playing around. On a whim," she told him. "I didn't think you'd actually be able to hear me."

"Huh?"

"So I'm not letting you pin some debt of gratitude on me for that." She grinned. "From now on, it's going to be different, though."

"F-from now on?" Haruyuki gaped at her, and Seri deliberately flicked his forehead. "Ow!"

"Crow, have you already forgotten why you brought me back to life?"

"Um." Rummaging through his brain, he finally remembered. He'd asked Centaurea Sentry to teach him Omega style and, as a result, been given this assignment. And the reason he'd wanted to learn Omega style was to help him in the mission to subjugate the Sun God Inti, which was coming up in a mere eleven hours.

"O-oh, right! Will you teach me Omega style?"

"If I wasn't going to, I wouldn't have named myself Maestro," she responded, fortunately, but then she quickly furrowed her brow. "However, there's still one more hurdle to overcome."

"H-hurdle? What?"

"I have my memories of being Centaurea Sentry back. But I absolutely have to have one more thing in order to return as a Burst Linker."

What on earth could that be? he thought but then finally realized it. "Oh! The BB program..."

"Exactly. When I lost all my points, it was forcibly uninstalled from my Neurolinker."

"The icon hasn't returned to your virtual desktop?"

"I don't see it yet."

This response reminded him of a moment a few minutes earlier. Right before she announced that her memory was completely synced, Seri had swiped her left hand to the side. The gesture to shrink a virtual desktop.

How great had her despair been when she'd gotten her memory back but not the BB program? He so keenly felt her pain that he didn't want to know the answer.

“Uh...Um!” Suddenly, he set both hands on her arm. “If it doesn’t come back, I’ll send the BB program to your Neurolinker!”

“...Crow, do you understand what that means?”

“Of course.” He nodded deeply.

To copy and install the Brain Burst program was, in other words, to become parent and child. Only one attempt was permitted, and Seri clearly met the requirements to become a Burst Linker. But even if it did succeed, Haruyuki would not be able to make another child.

Around the time he reached level five, he had started thinking about if he would become a parent at some point. But he’d thought that choice was far in the distant future, and he didn’t even know if he really wanted to become one. He wouldn’t begrudge using his only attempt, however, if it was for the sake of Centaurea Sentry, to whom he owed a real debt.

With a gaze that included all these thoughts, he stared directly into her eyes.

Her expression suddenly softening, Seri patted his hands lightly. “The master becoming the student’s child—it would not be seemly. Never fear. Even without relying on your assistance, we shall find a way.”

...Why did you change back?

Seri didn’t give him the time to ask. She was already brandishing her left hand and waving her right to bring back her virtual desktop. Her jet-black eyes stared into the empty space until finally she said, “It’s there.”

“I-it is?! The Brain Burst icon?!”

“There’s no way I’d mistake it for something else. It’s back exactly where it used to be.”

“Y—”

Yesssss! He very nearly shouted and wrapped his arms around her, but he managed to restrain himself in the nick of time. He quickly returned his half-open hands to his lap, and an awkward smile rose on his face.

“Th-that’s great,” he said. “But was it copied from somewhere, then? Did my Neurolinker just send it on its own before?”

“Hmm.” Seri nimbly moved the fingers of her left hand and then shook her head. “No, it seems like something else. The sender in my logs is masked, but it was probably sent directly by the central server. Almost like—”

“Almost like?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s nothing. Anyway, that’s the final hurdle cleared. From this moment, Crow—Arita—you are formally my student,” she announced and then turned her torso toward him as she extended her right hand.

This time he had no reason to hesitate. Haruyuki gripped her hand firmly before bowing deeply. “Th-thank you!”

Having come all this way, he’d finally acquired his second—er, third—instructor, and while the question of how he was going to explain this to Kuroyukihime and Fuko popped into his head, he could worry about that once they’d rescued Kuroyukihime. Right now, his priority was to learn the mysterious Omega-style Whole Blade and fulfill his important role as main attacker within the Inti mission.

Lifting his head, he let go of Seri’s hand and her powerful grip, befitting someone as athletic as she was. They both stood at the same time and stepped out from under the wisteria to look upward.

At some point, the color of the evening sky had grown quite rich. As if sucked in by the vermillion on the verge of changing to indigo, Seri took a deep breath before returning her gaze to Haruyuki.

“You spent long hours swinging your sword on the Mean Level, so go rest for today. I have practice tomorrow morning, so our training...” She paused thoughtfully. “Okay, so eight-ish tomorrow night—”

“Oh!” he interrupted. “I’m sorry—that’ll be too late.”

“Too late for what?”

Haruyuki finally realized he hadn’t mentioned anything to her about the huge battle coming up in the morning. “Um, it’s...At five tomorrow morning, I have to defeat this Legend-class Enemy, the Sun God Inti.”

Seri’s eyes widened and her jaw dropped. She froze in that position for five solid seconds. Finally, a deep groove was carved out between her brows, and her lips trembled slightly.

“Of what do you speaaaaaak?!”

Her shout sent the sparrows perched on the wisteria flapping into the sky.

Once Haruyuki had explained the various incidents concerning the Acceleration Research Society, Seri Suzukawa returned to her fifth-floor condo and then came outside again a mere fifteen minutes later. She had changed from her gym clothes into an unbleached linen shirt and dark-gray capri pants and was carrying an unadorned canvas backpack.

“Let’s go!” she called to Haruyuki, who was waiting at the park entrance, and started to walk toward the main road.

Matching his pace to Seri’s wide, brisk stride, Haruyuki asked in a small voice, “Uh, um, are you really sure? I mean, I’m grateful, but... It’s pretty far, and the park back there would have...”

Instantly, she gave him a hardened stare, definitely reminiscent of a veteran Linker. “Arita, do you honestly believe you’ll be able to master the secrets of Omega style with a month or two of training?”

“Huh?! N-no, that’s not what I meant, but, um, I don’t have to become a fully realized master. If you could just teach me some techniques that might work on Inti—”

“You’re soft with those sweet thoughts. Sweeter than *gulab jamun*. That ball has a sick hard core inside those flames, and you’re not going to be able to cut even a millimeter into it with a half-assed slash.”

“...What’s *gulab jamun*?” he asked the thing that caught his attention.

Seri snorted. “I’ll treat you to some soon. Anyway, the Tozai Line’s all right, yeah?”

“Oh! Sure. If we change to the JR train line at the last stop in Nakano, get off at Koenji Station...,” he said. “Well, we could also just walk the one station.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” she replied calmly and kept walking at a brisk pace that gave no hint of any exhaustion from soccer practice. When they hit the Kanda River, they went east along the path next to the waterway. If they kept going like that, they’d come out at Takadanobaba Station soon enough.

It was just like she’d said: They couldn’t exactly dive from a bench

in the park if they were going to be in the Unlimited Neutral Field on the order of months. Thirty days on the other side meant about forty-three minutes would pass in the real world. That said...

"Um, Seri—I mean, Maestro, are you okay with this?"

"With what?"

"I-it's just..." He paused. "This is the first time we've met in the real, and even I know the way I was talking back there was suspicious. So I was wondering if you weren't kind of anxious to be suddenly going to the house of a guy like that."

He braced himself for another scolding, but Seri just stared blankly for a moment before saying, "Mmm. Well, normally, I guess, yeah. And I'll tell you right now. This is the first time I've ever gone to a boy's house, okay?"

"I-it is?"

"But it totally doesn't feel like this is the first time I've met you, Arita. Our contact in BB was actually when you were fighting Glacier Behemoth, so in real time, it's a mere...um, two days, right?"

"R-right." He nodded.

"But the first time I detected your existence was when you fought the fifth. And even in real time, that was already six months ago."

"The fifth?" Now Haruyuki was left staring blankly. *The fifth what?* he wondered before finally getting it. Obviously the fifth Chrome Disaster, Cherry Rook. Through his senses, Seri had detected Silver Crow for the first time.

Right. Seri Suzukawa was Centaurea Sentry, but she had also been the third Chrome Disaster. So did that mean she was also linked to Cherry Rook and the fourth Chrome Disaster? Haruyuki stared intently at her cool profile as he tried to decide whether to voice the question.

But almost as if she'd guessed what he was going to say, Seri raised a hand slightly and said, "Let's talk about that later. It's too much to handle and walk at the same time."

"Okay."

They continued in silence for a while. Before he knew it, there was only a hint of red left in the western sky, and the lights along the walkway were shining with white light. The temperature finally started to drop, and the wind blowing in from across the river felt good, cooling his hot skin. A bicycle with a small child in a child seat passed them, the equipped motor humming.

"Maestro—Sentry. Were you always by yourself inside the Main Visualizer?" Haruyuki threw her a different question, and Seri looked thoughtful for a moment before, for some reason, patting his head.

"That depends on the definition of 'by myself.' I was alone, but it's not like I was all by myself in the dark for thousands of years. If that

had been the case, I think my spirit inside the light quantum circuit would have broken before ten years had even gone by. Fundamentally, it's like I was sleeping all that time, and every rare once in a while, I would wake up for a brief period and think about things."

"Things?"

"About Brain Burst, about myself, and...like, 'I'll have to train this chickadee over from zero.' Stuff like that."

It was clear that the chickadee was Haruyuki, so he reflexively shrank into himself. "O-oh yeah?"

"So I'm happy my dreams have come true now. A night out's nothing compared to that," she said as if processing the idea in real time, and then a mischievous smile slid across her lips as she continued. "I told my parents I was staying over at Shima's, but if they find me out, you apologize with me, yeah?"

"Y-yes— No, no, no, no! I can't!" Haruyuki waved his hands in front of his face, and Seri laughed out loud as she walked over to the entrance to the Tozai Line at Takadanobaba Station that had come into view.

After alighting at Nakano Station, they reached Haruyuki's condo building at seven. The sky was already totally dark, but his mother wouldn't be home until the next morning, so unlike Seri, there was no need for him to make up any excuses. He didn't know whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

They took the elevator to the twenty-second floor and made their way down the hall. Haruyuki was about to unlock the door to his condo when—

"Huh?!" He yanked his hand back from the holopanel.

"What's wrong?" Seri looked wary.

"Um. The security says someone's home," he explained quietly.

"Huh? I thought your mom wasn't coming home until morning?"

"She's not supposed to." He hurriedly opened his mail, but there was no message saying her plans had changed. She always came home in the morning, but she was very precise about this sort of thing, so it was hard to believe she would return without saying anything. But he couldn't come up with any other explanation. "Wh-what should we do?"

"Don't ask me. Maybe your only option is to say I'm a friend and we're doing homework?"

"B-but...Maestro, no matter how you look at it, eighth grade is just..."

"Sorry for having an old face." She frowned but then shrugged dramatically. "So say whatever you want, like that I'm your girlfriend

or something.”

“N-no, that’s a little...” As he shook his head, he desperately examined temporary measures. If his mother was already home, then it was impossible for Seri to stay over. There was just no way. About the longest she would be able to stay was until ten o’clock, so three more hours. If they dived that whole time, they would be able to remain in the Unlimited Neutral Field for 125 days, about four months. He wanted to think they would be able to finish his training in that time.

“I’ll go with you’re in a higher grade at school,” he announced finally.

Seri nodded, looking like the whole thing was funny somehow. “Understood. Umesato...right?”

“That’s right. I’ll explain things, so you just try not to talk as much as possible.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Okay, here we go!”

Hesitating now would only decrease their training time. Firming his resolve, he touched the holopanel and unlocked the door. As soon as he heard the lock open, he yanked on the door handle.

The entryway was dark, but bright light spilled out through the checkered glass of the living room door at the end of the hallway. It looked like his mother had actually come home half a day early. Now that he’d come this far, however, there was no turning back. He led Seri down the hallway and listened hard at the door. He couldn’t hear any sound from inside. Maybe she was having a glass of wine on the sofa.

Just rip off the Band-Aid!

Haruyuki turned the knob and threw open the door.

“Welcome home!”

“““““Welcome home!”””””

A chorus of voices rang out, and Haruyuki froze to the spot in shock.

There were a lot of people. Pressed in around the dining table, standing clustered around the sofa, turning warm smiles toward him. And naturally, not an unfamiliar face among them: Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri, Takumu, Fuko, Utai, Akira, Niko, Pard, Rin, Shihoko, Satomi, Yume, Rui. Pretty much everyone from the Nega Nebulus Black side.

While he gaped, he heard a lively *puh-puh-puh-pom*, and colorful paper confetti danced down from the ceiling. A large banner appeared above the window on the south side. Written in hand was CONGRATULATIONS, SPECIAL MISSION LEADER SILVER CROW! A SUPER, SUPER, SUPER SEND-OFF PARTY!! Naturally, all of this was AR objects, but the feast that covered every centimeter of the table appeared to be real.

The ratio of girls is as high as ever...

His brain chased after this escapist thought, and Haruyuki somehow managed to open his mouth.

“Uh, um, what exactly is—?”

“You’re laaaaate!!”

He was interrupted by Chiyuri’s shouting. Smile turning to a puffed-cheek pout, his childhood friend put her hands on her hips and proceeded to grill him.

“Haru, the meeting ended just after five, didn’t it? Fuko told us she let you out around Waseda, but where on earth did you go?! We even went to the trouble of hiding our shoes and everything!”

“That’s, uh— No, wait.” He shook his head. “You have to tell me what all of this is!”

“You’d know if you took one look at the banner!” she snapped. “We thought it up when I ran into Kuroyukihime this afternoon—we wanted to cheer you on now that you’re the attacker in the Inti mission, so you should be grateful! By the way, we even got your mom’s permission and everything!”

“Wh-when did you—? Master, did you know about this?”

When he turned his gaze on Fuko, who he had only said good-bye to in Kansenen Park two hours earlier, she returned a faintly wry smile.

“I was out of the loop on this one, as well. If I had known, I wouldn’t have let you take that detour.”

“Apologies, Fuko. It was to prevent information leaks,” Kuroyukihime said.

Fuko pursed her lips. “I’m not the type to let it all out on my face, you know.”

“Whatever!” Niko’s loud voice put a stop to this back-and-forth. “Let’s get this thing started! I’m s to the *tarving*!”

“Agreed!” Shihoko responded and ran over to Haruyuki. “Look, Corvus, come on over here! The feast’ll get cold!” She was about to tug on his hand as he stood in the doorway to the living room and then blinked rapidly. “Huh? Corvus, who’s that?”

Presented with this question, Haruyuki finally remembered that he was still making Seri Suzukawa wait behind him, and he hurriedly moved to one side and urged her to come into the room. Seri showed absolutely no sign of flinching as she stepped forward and all eyes focused on her.

His friends looked doubtful, and Haruyuki introduced her half on autopilot. “Um, this is Seri Suzukawa. Her avatar name is Centaurea Sentry.”

The Petit Paquet group, Rin, and Chiyu and Taku—the younger members—still looked puzzled at this, but the reaction of the high

rankers was different.

“Ruthless!!” Kuroyukihime shouted, immediately bracing herself.

“Asura!!” Fuko cried, jumping forward next to her.

“Omega Weapon!!” Akira shouted, standing farther to the side.

Even Utai had an unprecedentedly stern look on her face.

That last one is new to me, but I feel kinda like I've heard it somewhere before, Haruyuki thought and finally grasped the reason for this reaction.

Centaurea Sentry was a master fencer whose name had thundered since the dawn of the Accelerated World. She naturally would have fought the older members of his Legion. And Sentry had also become the third Chrome Disaster, been subjugated by the Blue King, and banished from the Accelerated World. It would have been odd if they hadn't been on guard when suddenly faced with such a person in the flesh.

“No! Um! It's!” Haruyuki panicked belatedly, and Seri put a hand on his shoulder as she took another step forward.

“'Tis a strange thing. Even upon first meeting in the real, we know you, more or less.” For some reason, she spoke in Sentry's voice, and a faint smile curled on her lips as she pointed at Fuko. “You would be Strato-Shooter. Beside you, Aquamatic and Testarossa.”

She moved her finger to Akira and Utai in turn and then faced Kuroyukihime.

“And you are World End? We never dreamed we would come face-to-face with our former friendly rivals in such a fashion. And the Anomaly...does not appear to be that boy.”

Takumu silently shook his head, and Seri shrugged lightly.

“Regrettable. We thought to battle decisively for the first time in four years.”

Kuroyukihime and the others made no move to reply. It was almost as if they were seeing a ghost—actually, that was probably exactly how they felt.

It was Niko, who likely had no overlap with the time period when Sentry was active, who spoke up instead. “Whoa, whoa, whooooooooo!” Both hands thrust into the pockets of her cutoff jeans, shoulders squared, she strode forward in genuine hoodlum style. “I don't care if you're Sentry or Country, but you don't get to just waltz into the party and bring it on!”

“And who might you be?”

Even challenged by Seri, who was much taller, Niko kept strutting as she introduced herself. “I'm the second Red King, Scarlet Rain! You wanna duel, I'll take ya, so just come at me right now!”

“H-h-h-hey, Niko...” Haruyuki worried that given Sentry's personality, she might actually start a duel, but Seri grinned as though

she had all the time in the world.

"I see. So you're Rider's successor? We would not hesitate to show you our skill, but we are disinclined to cast a shadow on your hard-won banquet."

"What'd you say?!" Niko snarled. "You trying to say I'd lose?!"

"O-okay, okay." Haruyuki somehow managed to insert himself between the girls, and he grabbed Niko with both hands to pull her away from Seri.

"Ah! Hey! What're ya doing?!"

He carried the struggling firebrand over to Pard.

"It's hard to believe, but there seems to be no doubt that you really are Sentry," Kuroyukihime said, her voice hoarse, and she snapped her hand out at Seri. "There are many things I would ask you, but why on earth are you even with Haruyuki—Silver Crow to start with?!"

"It's obvious." Seri whipped a hand up as if blocking Kuroyukihime's slicing attack. "We are Crow's teacher, and Crow is our student."

Five minutes later.

While Haruyuki scarfed down Cajun chicken in the seat of honor at the end of the dining table, Takumu, sitting diagonally to his right, said seriously, "Haru, how did you end up getting involved with a person like *that*?"

"I-it's not like *I* contacted *her* or anything," he muttered before changing his tone and continuing. "Oh, and, Taku, congrats on making it to the Kanto meet. We should be having a party for you instead of this send-off for me."

"Nah, I ended up losing in the semifinals, so..." He shrugged. "You can celebrate me when I win at Kanto."

"Oh! Looking forward to it. Next time, we'll all come cheer for you."

"Thanks. It'd be great if everything was sorted out by then." Takumu looked over at the sofa, so Haruyuki also shifted his gaze.

Fuko, Kuroyukihime, and Seri were sitting on the three-person sofa, and for some reason, they were all eating thick rolls of sushi. When they finished at the same time, they all took a sip of cold tea and let out sighs simultaneously.

"The sushi rolls are delicious. You make them?" Seri said to Utai, having dropped her ponderous Sentry tone.

The younger girl sat formally on her knees on the carpet, and her reply, which happened to be in Haruyuki's field of view, appeared as text. UI> YES, ALTHOUGH MY NANNY ALSO HELPED.

"Nice." Seri smiled. "I thought you were pretty put-together on

the other side, but you're even more so in the real. If you ever want to apprentice with me, you're more than welcome."

Before the seemingly stunned Utai could move her fingers, Fuko said with a smile, "Would you like to be knocked into next week?"

"Oh my! But I believe in the sum total score, I had more wins than losses."

What?! Seriously?! Maestro Sentry had more wins than losses against Master Raker?!

Haruyuki was apparently not the only one dumbfounded at this; the air in the large living/dining room was filled with tense chatter.

"That's because you ran off after winning, isn't it?" she responded in a somehow more threatening voice, maintaining her vacuum-breaking Raker smile. "I could turn that score on its head for you right now, if you'd like?"

"I think that'd only increase the gap," Seri insisted.

They radiated ice-cold battle lust from opposite ends of the sofa. But just as the swirling auras were about to collide, Kuroyukihime raised her hands from the middle and pushed on their shoulders.

"All right, that's enough! If the two of you can't be good until the end of the party at least, then you will be sentenced to no dessert!"

Instantly, their battle lust subsided as though it had never existed in the first place. He supposed that even the fiercest, most legendary warriors in the Accelerated World were still sugar-loving girls in the real world. But then he rethought this stance and decided they were absolutely not too easy to understand as that. He secretly prayed there would be no trouble until at least the end of the party, just as Kuroyukihime said.

"Crow...Arita," Rui Odagiri said from her position next to Takumu, and Haruyuki looked over at her. In a casual T-shirt and jeans, she leaned forward slightly and asked quietly, "The fact that you're apprenticing with someone with the nickname Ruthless, does that mean you're seriously aiming to be a sword user?"

"N-no, no. It's not like that," Haruyuki replied reflexively and then had the thought that this might sound like he was taking the sword lightly, so he glanced over at Takumu. His childhood friend returned a slightly wry smile, as if to say he'd read Haruyuki's mind.

He turned back to Rui and continued. "Um, I took the sword as my level-up bonus because I wanted to be able to do more things. Like, all this time, I've only been thinking about how I could get stronger, but joining up with people for tag-team matches, fighting in groups, I started feeling like I wanted to expand my range of fighting styles."

That was the sincere truth in his heart—or it should have been. But the previous evening, Haruyuki had told Kuroyukihime one more

reason: He wanted to fight Takumu with a sword when they dueled again for real once they reached level seven, just like they'd promised each other.

“The reason that you are limiting your fight with him to sword against sword is because somewhere deep in your heart, you feel you would win if it was a no-holds-barred contest, isn't it?”

He didn't, though. The many different special attacks Takumu/Cyan Pile had at his disposal were all powerful, and Haruyuki believed that when he activated his Incarnate technique Cyan Blade, Takumu was in the most powerful class as a sword user. Which was exactly why he wanted to challenge him with a sword. Rather than evade Takumu's slicing attacks, he would stand tall and cross swords with him. That was the kind of fight he wanted to have.



Haruyuki still hadn't told Takumu how he felt. He needed to reach a level of swordsmanship Takumu would approve of, first.

"I get that," Rui said. "It's true that synergy among abilities is key in tag-team matches and group fights. If you expand your range of fighting styles, you can construct even more synergies. But...you sure? Not doing that jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none thing?"

Haruyuki could tell this was no metaphor but something she was seriously worried about, and he thoroughly digested her words before replying. "Yes, to be honest, I'm concerned myself. In fact, I haven't been training much lately in hand-to-hand combat. But it's not like I can redo my bonus. I just have to accept it and do the best I can."

It was hard to tell if he was looking backward or forward, and both Rui and Takumu grinned.

Akira, who was alternating between picking *onigiri* rice balls and *karaage* chicken, spoke, half muttering and yet perfectly clear to everyone at that end of the table. "It's not bad to covet things in Brain Burst."

"I-it's not?" He cocked his head.

"The reason you end up a jack-of-all-trades in the real is because there isn't enough time to master the various paths," she told him. "But in the Accelerated World, for all practical purposes, you have an infinite amount of time."

"W-well, I guess that's true." Haruyuki darted his eyes around, slightly perplexed, and Akira turned the red frames of her glasses toward the sofa, having finished her *onigiri*.

"In that sense, I don't think it's bad that you're apprenticing to her. But...Omega Weapon is dangerous. Make very sure you don't get pulled in too far."

The first to respond to Akira's murmured warning was Satomi Mito of the Petit Paquet group, sitting at the opposite end of the table.

"Akira, what does this nickname Omega Weapon mean?"

"It means, if you encounter her, it's over."

"...?"

Shihoko and Yume, seated on either side of Satomi, simultaneously cocked their heads, perhaps also not understanding. It didn't click for Haruyuki, either, but this feeling of a challenge being the beginning of the end was probably a very real feeling for the Burst Linkers of old. Even Haruyuki, who was a student of this school, couldn't immediately come up with a way to counter Omega style or understand how it cut through steel. It seemed impossible to defend against. Intently maintaining distance while attacking from afar...That kind of simple strategy wouldn't work on Sentry.

Except. The fact that it was impossible to defend against was the

same as the Black King's Terminate Sword. So then maybe it could be handled in the same way. Which logic would be given priority: the Way of the Flexible, controlling your opponent's movement with circular motions, or Omega style, which sought out the minimum amount of motions necessary?

Haruyuki sank into thought with a chicken bone still in one hand, and Akira's voice reached his ears, even huskier now.

"Still, it's a surprise she didn't lose all her points. Wonder where she's been, and what she's been up to."

"Huh? Who?" Haruyuki asked, and Akira gave him a funny look.

"I'm talking about Sentry, obviously."

"..."

He gaped at her for a second before he finally realized that the veteran Burst Linkers in the room thought Sentry had actually survived the fight with the Blue King three and a half years earlier. And naturally, he himself wouldn't have believed the story that she'd lost all her points and come back to life if he hadn't seen it play out with his own eyes.

He turned his gaze toward the living room once more, wondering how on earth Seri was going to explain all of that, but the girl was biting into a smoked salmon canapé with a calm expression. It was fearsome grit in the face of an entirely unexpected cracking in the real.

Niko, Pard, Rin, and Chiyuri were sitting on the cushions arranged opposite the sofa, chatting about the dishes that covered the coffee table.

I want a canapé, too, he thought, but he didn't have the courage to break their little circle.

At any rate, as long as Seri was keeping the situation to herself, Haruyuki couldn't exactly answer Akira's question, so he changed the subject. "Um. Did everyone bring some food today?"

"We did!" Shihoko replied. "Bell—er, Chiyuri sent us a message around four saying we were having a send-off party, so we should all meet at Koenji Station at six and she would be happy if people brought food. So we hurried to make some things."

"Oh! Did you make this Cajun chicken, Shihoko?" he asked.

"Yup. How'd it taste?"

"R-really good. Amazing." He grinned. "So you're great at making things besides sweets, too."

"Heh-heh-heh." Shihoko laughed as though embarrassed. "I did get my mom to help a little, though."

Yume abruptly shoved a tortilla roll into her mouth.

"Ngh! Ngaaah!"

"Yeah, yeah, you two aren't allowed to walk off into your own

private world!" Yume told her friend.

We weren't!! Haruyuki wanted to shout.

But before he could, Satomi said with a grin, "Got a message from Shiho right after the mail from Bell came. It said she totally wanted to go, so me and Yume totally had to come, too."

"Ngah!" Tortilla roll still stuffed in her mouth, Shihoko turned beet red as she covered Satomi's mouth.

Rui looked half-exasperated and half at total peace. "Not really for me to say, I guess, but it's pretty amazing that this many people came with just two hours' notice. You didn't have practice, Pile?" She turned her eyes toward Takumu, and he shook his head sharply.

"No, we had the meet yesterday, so we get today off. Although practice starts again tomorrow."

"My, so then you have to get a good night's sleep tonight, yeah?" Rui said. "Can you take part in the Inti mission at five?"

"Of course." Takumu nodded. "There should be something I can do."

"Sorry, Taku," Haruyuki interrupted. "I really should have handed Lucid Blade over to you temporarily so you could be the attacker."

"Whoa, what are you talking about?" Eyes wide behind his glasses, Takumu patted Haruyuki's shoulder. "I mean, you know there's no way anyone could master a borrowed Enhanced Armament in a day. And this is a joint mission of the five Legions, so there are plenty of sword users way stronger than me. I can't exactly march in there and leave Coba-Manga and Decurion on the sidelines."

"No, when it comes to the technique of a pure sword user..."

You're better, Taku. Haruyuki swallowed the words. Takumu's Cyan Blade was an Incarnate technique, so he couldn't use it in a normal duel. Until Pile got a new sword-type Enhanced Armament, his sword techniques couldn't be compared with those of Coba-Manga and the other sword users.

"My duel avatar's not a sword user," Takumu reminded gently, as if reading his mind. "That's bothered me at times, but lately, I've been feeling like maybe it actually means something important. Everything starts with loving your own avatar...right?"

"Right," Akira answered crisply. She had what was most likely the most distinct duel avatars of any of the Burst Linkers in the room. Tilting her glass so the ice clinked against it, she continued, "The general principle of 'same level, same potential' is at best a duel avatar's numerical specs. There are indeed differences when it comes to how well this matches up with the Burst Linker's capabilities, personality, likes, dislikes, abilities, and special attacks—or even the simple cool factor of appearance. But if you are just unhappy about it, then both you and your avatar will stagnate. If you're jealous of

people or hating them, you'll end up a prisoner of the dark side of Incarnate at some point."

"Painfully true." Rui looked like she was feeling actual pain at this. "I thought this difference was a fatal flaw in Brain Burst. I figured I could fill this gap with the ISS kits and make the game—the world—something more just. But this kind of perfectly equal world is warped. If you can recognize and respect other people's differences as their uniqueness, your avatar will definitely respond at some point. If I had realized that sooner, I wouldn't have ended up making so many Burst Linkers suffer."

He suddenly realized that the eight people camped out in the living room had closed their mouths and turned their heads toward him and his companions at the dining table.

Rin, wearing a skirt that reached her knees, which was unusual for her, stood from a cushion, clenched both hands into fists in front of her, and said, "My brother, Ash Roller, doesn't. Hate you. Or anything at all!"

She had said something similar two days earlier, on Saturday. Rui had come to the Arita house to join Nega Nebulus and to apologize for parasitizing so many Burst Linkers with ISS kits, and Rin had shouted in Ash-speak, "Taking an 'over' thing and making it a 'forever' thing is basic 'nothiiiiiiing'!!" But this time, Rin spoke to Rui in her own words.

"Magenta, everyone here. Really understands that you weren't. Fighting for your own sake, but for. Avocado and other. Burst Linkers. The ones to blame here. Are the Society. They made the kits. My brother and I both. Want to duel you soon, the regular duel that we love. And be happy in victory and sad at losing. So. So..." Rin was at a loss for words, and her parent, Fuko, placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"That's right," Fuko agreed. "Let's send the Acceleration Research Society and Black Vise—and while we're at it, the White King—flying already so that everyone can just have fun dueling. Ruthless, it's safe to assume you came for that same reason, yes?"

"Well, I also have a score to settle with Cosmos," Seri replied icily. *Huh... You do?*

Unable to ask about it, Haruyuki stared intently at her face. Their eyes met briefly, but he couldn't read in them the true intent of her words. Was it simply the win-lose of the duel like with Fuko, or was there some deeper connection?

Breaking the silence full of misgivings was Niko's indifferent voice. "Food's just about gone, huh! Getting to be dessert time over here!"

"Yes!" Chiyuri clapped her hands. "Okay, then! We'll just clear away the empty plates!"

His childhood friend put on an apron as she headed toward the kitchen, and Haruyuki chased after her. “I-I’ll help wash up.”

“This is your party, Haru. So just be good and sit down!” Chiyuri told him, and Takumu grabbed his shoulders from behind.

“That’s right. The guest of honor can just park it!”

Guided by Takumu’s firm grip, he had no choice but to obey. He moved to the sofa, where Kuroyukihime and the others were, and sat down.

Naturally, given that the ratio of girls was over 80 percent, the cleanup went smoothly. The work was efficiently divided up into people putting leftovers into containers, people carrying the dishes, people washing, and people drying; the cleanup was done in the blink of an eye. The Aritas had a built-in dishwasher, but Chiyuri’s handwashing, thanks to her training under her mother, Momoe, apparently did the trick much better. When Akira finally wiped down the dining table and Shihoko the low table, all remainders of the banquet had vanished without a trace. But for the girls, this was only the start of the main event.

A large cake box appeared from inside the refrigerator. All eyes were hotly on it as Pard placed it gently on the dining table.

Next to him, Niko puffed out her chest proudly. “Me and Pard brought an assortment of cakes from Patisserie La Plage!”

Ooh! The entire party clapped.

“Although they’re the clearance cakes that didn’t sell!”

Gulp! The entire party slumped. But this was just to go along with Niko’s joke. Everyone there knew that the famed Patisserie La Plage never failed to sell out.

New plates and forks were set in front of the fifteen people standing around the table, and the seal on the box was finally broken. As soon as they saw the many, multicolored slices of cake packed inside, many of the members present cried out in delight. Shortcake, cheesecake, Mont Blanc, mille-feuille, et cetera, et cetera...But not a single slice of chocolate cake, likely out of consideration for Shihoko, who was allergic.

All the cakes looked delicious, but the one that shone the brightest was indeed the La Plage classic, the strawberry labyrinth, with its three large strawberries on top. Given that this sold out every day before three, there was only one slice in the box. The many eyes that focused on it looked at Haruyuki, sparks flying—or so he felt.

“Mmm. Now then, I suppose we’re all good with having the guest of honor choose first?” Kuroyukihime said, and the entire party nodded as one.

“R-really? Then if you don’t mind...,” Haruyuki murmured as he moved his right hand. He wondered how many more levels he’d have

to go up before he'd be able to grab the strawberry labyrinth without hesitation and then set his sights on the rare cheesecake with blueberry sauce. "I-I'll go with this."

"Kay." Pard grabbed it with tongs in a practiced movement and moved the cake to the plate in front of Haruyuki.

"Now, for the rest, I suppose we're all good with deciding with this?" Kuroyukihime suddenly brandished a fist, so Haruyuki very nearly dropped his cake, plate and all. *Not a duel?!* But then she held up two fingers and changed the fist into scissors.

"No argument here," Fuko responded.

"Same as above." Akira nodded.

While everyone grew more excited, Seri cleared her throat. "I'm not a Legion member, and I didn't bring any food. I wonder if it's all right for me to join?"

"Nega Nebulus is not such a stingy Legion as to cast someone out for a reason like that." Kuroyukihime grinned at her.

"Then I'll gladly." Seri readied her right hand.

Silence came once more. Their combined battle lust swirled through the condo, setting off sparks.

"Rock!" Kuroyukihime thrust her fist forward and then raised it high in the air.

""""Paper, scissors, shoot!""""

The impromptu send-off party ended at eight. Fuko drove home the three members of Petit Paquet, who lived farther away, and Utai the elementary student, while the similarly aged Niko rode off north on Pard's large motorcycle. When Rui and Akira went home by train and Chiyuri and Takumu returned to their condos on the lower floors, the only guests left in the Arita home were Kuroyukihime, Rin, and Seri.

"I am sorry about that, Haruyuki," Kuroyukihime said as she got her things together.

"Huh?" Haruyuki blinked a few times. "About what?"

"We said it was a send-off party, but in the end, we just got all carried away as usual. I hope it did cultivate at least a little courage in you."

"I-it cultivated! I've got a full tank of courage!" Haruyuki flexed a bicep at her, and the sword master giggled.

"In that case, make sure to get a good sleep before the mission starts."

"I will! Kuroyukihime"—he paused—"we're definitely going to rescue you from Inti!"

"I have faith that you will. But don't push too hard. If you feel it's too dangerous, you have to get away from the spot immediately. We can make the attempt again any number of times," Kuroyukihime told him, placing her hands on his shoulders and squeezing. She nodded deeply before taking a step back and looking at Seri and Rin. "You're by train, too? Let's walk to the station together."

But Seri shrugged and declined. "I'm not going home. I came over to train Crow."

"...What?"

And then Rin smiled shyly. "Um. I also thought we were all going to be together until morning, so I..."

".....What?!"

A dumbfounded Kuroyukihime gradually shifted toward anger as Haruyuki watched and shrank into himself. Finally, the tote bag dropped from her hand. She walked over to the sofa, threw herself down on it, and smoothed the skirt of her black dress as she crossed

her legs.

“Then I’m not leaving, either.”

“Y-you’re not leaving?” he asked slowly.

“What? Ruthless and Kusakabe can stay, but you’re chasing me out?”

“N-no, no! That’s not— It’s totally okay with me. But I was just thinking you don’t have your stuff, so...” He let his sentence trail off.

“I’ll work something out.” Kuroyukihime rose to her feet again and turned toward the entryway, where her bag was. “I’m going downstairs to pick up a few things, so you just be good!”

Kachak! Chak!

A few moments after the lock sounded, Seri shook her head. “Nega Nebulus is a pretty interesting Legion, hmm?”

“Y-yes.” Haruyuki could only nod in agreement.

The three girls took turns in the bath, leaving Haruyuki to take his last. When he returned to the living room, it was nine o’clock. The Sun God Inti mission was scheduled early, for five in the morning, so they still had eight hours—no, they *only* had eight hours left.



Kuroyukihime, now in a long T-shirt that nearly reached her knees, and Seri, looking sporty in a tank top and shorts, occupied the sofa, while Rin, wearing actual pajamas, was plopped down on a cushion on the floor. A sweet fragrance wafted off them as he awkwardly approached, and Rin poured him a glass of barley tea from the insulated pitcher on the low table.

“Here, Arita.”

“Th-thanks,” he said as he accepted it, and he sat down formally on his knees on the cushion next to her before taking a sip. The chilled tea sank into his heated body, and he let out a sigh, but he was definitely not going to be able to fully relax in this situation. Fuko had stepped in as a buffer between them earlier, but Kuroyukihime and Centaurea Sentry seemed to have a relationship that was the very definition of cutthroat, so they weren’t going to make nice on their own so easy as all that. In fact, not only were they not talking as they sat next to each other, they weren’t even looking at each other.

How exactly am I supposed to explain Sentry’s comeback from total point loss when they’re like this? Haruyuki wondered anxiously.

“Should I call you by your first or last name?” Kuroyukihime asked suddenly, having up to that point stuck with calling Seri “Ruthless.”

With her long—although not as long as Kuroyukihime’s—hair up in a ponytail, Seri replied with an amused look on her face, “Seri’s fine. I should just call you Kuroyukihime?”

“You can leave the *hime* off.”

“Okay, Kuroyuki it is. Still twice as long as my name, though.”

“Do what you want.”

Having reached a consensus, the two sipped their tea in tandem. Haruyuki prayed the détente would continue, but the next question Kuroyukihime asked abruptly touched on the crux of things.

“So then, Seri. How long is this training or what have you with Haruyuki going to take?”

Seri thought a moment before replying, “It depends on Crow, but three hours ought to do it.”

“That’s not...inside time, is it?”

“Of course not.” Seri laughed. “We’re talking four months over there. Even if he can’t quite get to mastering the secret of Omega style in that time, he’ll be able to get a bit of a handle on the basics... maybe.”

Haruyuki’s shoulders slumped at this, but Kuroyukihime’s expression softened for some reason.

“Omega-style Whole Blade,” she mused. “That takes me back. Many Burst Linkers considered it evil, but I didn’t hate it.”

“That’s ‘cause your limb swords are kinda like that—or, even worse, *pure* evil.”

“Hey, my Terminate Sword is a respectable ability. But Omega style is just a bit of flash in the pan, barely a technique at all.”

“Uh! Um!” Growing concerned about what exactly it was he was about to study, Haruyuki interrupted the conversation. “What do you mean by ‘barely’...?”

Seri crossed her long, lean legs and dangled a slipper from her toes. “You likely already understand this a bit, Crow, but with my Omega style, in the extreme, you don’t cut with a sword.”

“Th-then with what?”

“Logic. By giving real form to the logic of the maximum on the minuscule, your attack power becomes infinite instantaneously. You can cut whatever it might be—rock, steel. But that’s where people find fault with the technique.”

“Find fault?” he asked. “How?”

“They say it stinks of Incarnate.” Seri sniffed indignantly and rattled on at top speed. “Disgustingly rude. The Incarnate System forces a result by overwriting an intense image for something that would normally be impossible. It works on a foundation of charging through any impossibility and forcing the world to go along with you. Omega style is the polar opposite of that, as it cuts with logic—i.e., truth. The proof of that is that your sword doesn’t blink with flashy lights when you cut.”

Indeed, when Haruyuki and Takumu had sought Incarnate guidance from Seri, the Red King, Niko, had told them that the difference between a special attack and an Incarnate one was the fact that there was no gauge decrease and no light. Of course, there was also a reason for the light: this “overlay” was a light effect generated by the system when it processed the powerful signal spilling over from the user’s imagination into the duel avatar’s control system.

But not too long ago, Haruyuki had seen an Incarnate technique that had basically no light to it. That was, yes, the master swordsman Graphite Edge’s...

“B-but, Seri, doesn’t this ‘cut with logic’ idea resemble the third level of Incarnate technique? And I’m pretty sure that doesn’t make any huge light, either?”

“You really hit where it hurts.” Grimacing, Seri waved a hand dismissively. “It’s true that absolute logic, the crux of level-three Incarnate techniques, follows the reasoning that the most powerful thing is to overlay the impossible on the real. So it’s not that it has nothing in common with the gist of Omega style. But they’re fundamentally different. I’ll explain how once you’ve progressed a certain amount in your training.” She looked to one side. “Kuroyuki,

Crow's still only level six, and you're instructing him in level three already?"

"I'm not. It was Anomaly who showed him." Kuroyukihime scowled and crossed her legs like the other girl had. Haruyuki caught a glimpse of pale thighs poking out from the hem of her long T-shirt and automatically averted his eyes. The previous night, he had seen her thighs and everything else, too, but this absolutely did not mean he had developed a resistance to her.

Fortunately, none of the girls seemed to notice this, and Seri's voice soon mixed with a wry smile.

"Of course. Looks like he didn't come today, but I'm glad he's doing good."

"That's because right now, he's one of GW's Six Armors and paying his debts," Kuroyukihime informed her.

"Oh my," Seri said. "Looks like a lot's happened while I was gone."

Since Kuroyukihime didn't seem to be responding, Haruyuki looked up at her from his position at the low table. She swirled the ice in her glass of tea for a while, but eventually, she turned her whole body toward Seri.

"Sentry," she started. "What exactly happened to you three years ago? I simply assumed you were beaten down by Knight and lost all your points. And why would a master like you reach for the Armor of Catastrophe to begin with?"

This time, it was Seri's turn to be silent. She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, opened her mouth slightly, and then closed it a few times. "I'll leave answering your first question until the problem of Cosmos is resolved. I have some things there I'd like to think about myself. But I can answer your second question, although I can't tell you everything." She paused briefly.

"If there's darkness in the heart of the one who defeats it, the Armor of Catastrophe will drop directly into their storage, and if there's no darkness, it'll parasitize them with a piece of itself and wait for the time to fuse. When we subjugated the second—Magnesium Drake—it was indeed possible for me to cut out the fragment that tried to parasitize me. But I couldn't. Because, in a certain sense, the Armor is something I produced."

"What?! What do you mean...?" Kuroyukihime gasped.

"Huh?! *You* did?!" Haruyuki shouted. "But you weren't there. Where the White King and Black Vise set a trap for Saffron Blossom and forced her to total point loss with an Unlimited EK."

"No, I wasn't there. That was my crime," Seri half whispered and dropped her face to her knees.

Haruyuki couldn't understand what she meant. Did she have some

connection with Saffron Blossom and Chrome Falcon? Even if she did, though, Saffron's murder happened in the very earliest days of the Accelerated World. No matter how much of a veteran Sentry was, she couldn't have been as strong as she was now. If she had charged in, that would have only increased the number of sacrifices.

Kuroyukihime looked perplexed as well, but after hesitating several times, she finally placed a gentle hand on Seri's back. "I'm sorry, Seri. It appears I asked you an insensitive question. I won't push you any further about your reason for accepting the Armor. But tell me just one thing. Why did the Armor shift to the fourth, Devourer, when you were subjugated by Knight?"

Although this was the first time he'd heard the label Devourer, he understood it was likely the nickname given to the host of the fourth Chrome Disaster.

Seri slowly raised her face and let her gaze wander before shaking her head slightly. "I'm sorry. I don't know why, either. I can't believe there's darkness in Knight's heart, so the Armor should have tried to parasitize him. But Knight evaded that, and the fragment contacted Devourer somehow, I guess."

"Mmm. And then Devourer was subjugated by a team that included me, and the Armor dropped into the Yellow King's storage," Kuroyukihime said. "I have no desire to know what darkness lies in Radio's heart, but rather than equip the Armor himself, he kept it hidden for a long time until finally, he gave it to Prominence's Cherry Rook, and Haruyuki defeated Rook when Rook became the fifth. And then Haruyuki was parasitized. There, at last, the chain of tragedy, six generations of grief, was broken."

Haruyuki felt a shiver run through him. He was belatedly aware that the fact that he'd been able to escape the Armor's control was really the most miraculous of miracles. If it hadn't been for Kuroyukihime, who'd risked her life to stop him, and Saffron and Falcon, who'd guided him inside the Armor, it would have been impossible for him to crawl out of that darkness.

He didn't ever want to experience it again, but the Armor of Catastrophe had established a powerful link between himself and Seri, and it had brought about the miracle of recovery from total point loss...probably. Haruyuki couldn't truly hate the Beast inside the Armor of Catastrophe. This Enhanced Armament was born out of the scheming of the Acceleration Research Society and shouldn't have existed at all, but he was glad it hadn't completely disappeared even after it was purified by Ardor Maiden. He couldn't help feeling that way.

"Hey, about the Armor. What happened to the Disaster in the end?"

He lifted his head and discovered Seri staring at him. He panicked briefly but then realized there was no need to keep it a secret. "Um. The Disaster was purified and returned to its original form, The Destiny, so we sealed it in a player home with the longsword Star Caster. The key to the house was sealed in there with them, so no one will be able to touch them now."

"Yeah?" Seri nodded, and the warmest smile since her memories returned grew on her face. "That's great. Now I can train Crow without worry."

"Hyeh?!" Haruyuki shrank into himself.

But Kuroyukihime looked worry-free. "Haruyuki, I won't say anything further about your decision to learn Omega style. But if you're going to do it, then I won't allow half measures."

"O-okay..."

"Seri, take care of my child. Will you start right away?"

"Right..." Faced with this question from Kuroyukihime, Seri stared at Haruyuki for a moment before shaking her head. "No. We'll sleep for a bit first. A lot happened today, so I'm sure Crow's tired."

"Mmm, that's true." Kuroyukihime nodded and checked the time. "Well then, how about we sleep until one thirty and then do the training? Haruyuki, my apologies, but..."

"R-right!" Haruyuki leapt to his feet. "Um, two of you can use my mom's bed, and sorry, but the sofa—" He made this suggestion with the expectation that Rin and Kuroyukihime would end up using the bed, but he was interrupted halfway through.

"No, it's fine if we just sleep in a pile here," Kuroyukihime told him. "Although I would appreciate it if you would lend us something to throw over ourselves."

"What? A-are you sure? Okay...Just wait a minute." He left the living room and went into his mother's bedroom on the other side of the hall. He pulled four light blankets out of the massive closet and hurried back. "Here you go." He handed each girl a blanket and set the reserve blanket on the low table before retreating once more.

"Okay, so I'll sleep in my room. If you need anything, please call or mail me." He was about to finish with "good night," but Kuroyukihime interjected once again.

"No, you sleep here, too."

"Oka— Wait, whaaaaaat?! Why?!"

"Security reasons."

"B-but that's..."

He looked at Seri and Rin, seeking help, but they were both perfectly calm.

"Well, that'd make things faster when we're diving," Seri said.

"It's more fun. Together," Rin said, and he had no further route of

retreat.

Good thing I got four blankets, he said to himself.

He'd thought that it would have been good if at least one of them slept on the sofa, but when each of the girls set a floor cushion on a corner of the square rug, they formed a U around the low table. So Haruyuki had no choice but to make camp in the empty corner and turn the U into an O. Fortunately, the rug was large, so he was able to get the bare minimum of distance, and the thick core of the rug was soft and didn't seem likely to hurt his back.

After checking that everyone had settled into their positions, he opened his home server window and turned out the lights. All the curtains were closed, but since it was still only 9:30 PM, the lights of the town from the direction of Koenji Station slipped in through the slight gap so that it wasn't pitch-black in the living room.

Even so, when he laid his head on the cushion and relaxed, his thoughts began to scatter gently. He realized he still had on his Neurolinker, but it was too much of a hassle to take it off and set it on the nearest table. He was only going to sleep for four hours anyway, so he figured it was fine like this as he pulled the blanket up to his neck and closed his eyes.

Seri had said it, but a lot really had happened that day. Going to rescue Orchid Oracle with Rose Milady already felt like the distant past. But the long series of events would end very soon.

If they could defeat Inti in the mission that was to start at five AM or at least move it from its current location, the five kings, including Kuroyukihime, would be freed from the Unlimited EK. After that, the general attack on the White Legion would begin, and they could finally put a stop to the machinations of the Acceleration Research Society, who had already carried out so many evil deeds.

That reminds me. I wonder what exactly gulab jamun is.

His thoughts wandered without end and popped like bubbles until at last Haruyuki's mind sank into warm darkness.

But a mere ten minutes later, he opened his eyes at a somehow creeping sensation. Something was moving under his blanket. His half-asleep brain wondered if the cat had gotten in there before he remembered that they did not have a cat in the Arita house.

In which case, what?! Haruyuki lifted the blanket and looked down to find not a cat or a dog or a lizard, but rather a girl with short, fluffy hair—Rin Kusakabe.

“R—”

Instantly, his brain was completely awake, and he started to shout *Rin, what are you doing?!* But a slender index finger blocked his mouth. With a smile that was shy but also mischievous, she approached his

head from below. Clutched in her hand was an XSB cable.

He felt a slight clicking, and then a wired connection warning was displayed in his field of view. At the same time, a voice echoed in his head:

"I'm sorry for waking you. Up."

Haruyuki replied immediately in neurospeak: *"Th-that's fine, but, Rin, what exactly...?"*

"It's just. I didn't get to talk to you. At all. Today."

She was exactly right. During the send-off party, they had been sitting far apart, and even when it was only the three girls left, the business talk had continued without any breaks for Rin to speak. All that said, however, he wasn't sure about an eighth-grade girl crawling into his futon...

Before he could put this thought into neurospeak, Rin plastered herself to his side and brought a hand up to this shoulder. *"I...I decided. I was definitely going to talk to you today. Just the two of us."*

"T-talk? About what?" He stammered even though it was in his mind, but Rin only snuggled against him. He was just wearing a T-shirt, and her pajamas were thin, so there was basically nothing between them where they were touching, and an indescribable softness attacked his nervous system.

I thought girl Burst Linkers weren't comfortable with flesh-and-blood boys, though?! he shouted to himself in his mind, but Rin simply pushed herself closer to him.

She pressed her forehead to his chest and then looked up at him. *"Haven't I already told you...that I like you...?"*

"..."

Haruyuki froze. It was true. She had told him that.

A little over a month ago, Haruyuki had equipped the Armor of Catastrophe of his own will in order to save Ash Roller and Bush Utan when they were attacked by ISS kit users, and he'd become the sixth Chrome Disaster. After he returned to the real world, he'd told Kuroyukihime and the others, then locked his friends in his house and fled. Just as he was about to go outside via the shopping mall on the first floor, Rin Kusakabe had appeared before him.

She'd told him she was Ash Roller, and then they'd moved to Fuko's car, which had been parked on the second basement level of his condo building. After that, Rin had told him she liked him. Even though a month had passed since then, Haruyuki hadn't really given her any kind of proper response to this declaration. True, he'd been dealing with one thing after another, but this was unacceptable behavior for a boy.

"Rin," he murmured, and she put a finger to his lips.

"It's okay...I'm not trying to. Push you. For an answer."

“But...I...”

“Arita, you have a very important role. I can’t. Get in the way of that. It’s just...” Rin paused for a minute and then a smile spread across her face. *“It’s just, I don’t want you to forget. That I told you. That’s all I wanted to tell you. Today.”*

“I won’t forget!” Although he very nearly cried out in his real voice, Haruyuki just barely managed to channel the words into neurospeak instead before tentatively placing his hand on her shoulder. *“I...I was really happy you told me you like me. That’s the truth. Right now, I can’t really manage to like myself. But someday, if I can get over that...”*

Here, his linguistic abilities were exhausted, but a few tears bled into Rin’s wide eyes as she nodded firmly.

A slender hand slipped around his back. She shifted about ten centimeters to bring her face in front of his. Her lips trembled as though she were going to say something in her real voice, but no words were uttered. Instead, she slowly, slowly brought her face closer. Her sweet, hot breath tickled Haruyuki’s cheek.

All the recessed lights embedded in the living room ceiling flashed to life. The blanket covering them was ripped away, and Haruyuki jumped as a scolding voice thundered down on them:

“What are you two doing?!” Kuroyukihime stood in a daunting pose above his head. She bent at the waist and launched a second attack as she peered at their faces. *“I had us all sleep in the same room to guarantee security, and yet I can’t let my guard down for a second! Do you really think this is acceptable behavior for junior high students?!”*

Wait, Kuroyukihime. What about your bath attack yesterday?!

Unable to actually voice this question, Haruyuki froze in position, while Rin laughed. *“Heh-heh-heh.”*

Here, finally, Seri popped her head up on the other side of the low table and asked sleepily, *“Mmm, what? Night attack?”*

Under Kuroyukihime’s instruction, to ensure further security, the low table was moved aside, and the four of them repositioned themselves in parallel alongside one another, in the order of Rin, Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki, and Seri. On top of that, they were also very close to one another, and Haruyuki felt like he’d never be able to sleep in such a sardine-like formation.

But perhaps his brain really had reached its limit; the second he closed his eyes, his consciousness floated off somewhere, and Haruyuki slept without dreams until 1:30 AM.

“Wake up—it’s time,” a voice whispered as his body was shaken, and Haruyuki’s eyes snapped open.

He normally slept for an average of seven hours, so he’d thought that half that time wouldn’t be nearly enough, but his head was strangely clear. When he sat up in the blue darkness, Seri’s face was immediately to his left.

“Good morning,” he said before looking to his right, where Kuroyukihime and Rin were sleeping peacefully. Even though it was about three seconds past 1:30 AM, they showed no sign of waking.

“Huh? Their alarm’s not going off?” Haruyuki muttered.

“I woke up five minutes early and took off their Neurolinkers,” Seri said unexpectedly.

“Huh...? Why...?”

“Kuroyukihime can’t go into the Unlimited Neutral Field, and it’s not like Rin’s training, so let’s just let them sleep until morning.”

“I...guess you’re right. But they’ll probably be mad when they wake up.”

“If all goes well with your training, they’ll be glad.”

“Okay.” Haruyuki nodded, and Seri offered him a glass of cold water she had gotten at some point. He thanked her quietly as he took it and then drank about half of it. When he returned the glass, Seri finished off the remaining water without any hesitation and put the glass on the table without a sound.

“You okay for the washroom?”

“Yes, I went before we went to sleep.”

“Okay then, let’s get started.”

She laid down once more. He also returned his head to the cushion, and after they had both set timers to disconnect automatically in three hours, he looked to his left. Seri held out her hand and folded one finger down at a time. At the same time and at the quietest possible volume...

““Unlimited Burst.””

July 23, 1:30 AM. Haruyuki visited the Unlimited Neutral Field with

the objective of the longest continuous dive he had likely ever done. When he opened the eye lenses hidden behind Silver Crow's shining mask, dazzling sunlight burned his virtual retinas.

The sky above his head was dyed a deep blue, and the sun glittered brightly in the middle of it. His own condo building had turned into a whitish mountain, and he appeared to be standing on the top of that. The fact that he had been moved from indoors meant the mountain had no interior structure, so this wasn't a Sandstorm stage. It didn't seem to be a Wasteland stage or a Desert stage, either.

"What stage is it?" he muttered, and the response came from behind him.

"Pulled a rare one. This is a Salt Lake stage."

Haruyuki whirled around and was momentarily at a loss for words.

A diamond-shaped visor covering the face mask. Thin armor that looked glued to the avatar's naked body. Long hair flowing down the back—they were all just as he'd seen them on the Highest Level. But the contrast between the clear sapphire blue that colored the armor and the platinum hair that reflected the sunlight was far more beautiful than he'd imagined. He had seen too many blue-type duel avatars to count, but he felt like he had never seen such a clear hue as this before.

"Bluer than the Blue King," he murmured in awe, and the Ruthless Omega Weapon of an Asura hell, aka Centaurea Sentry, smiled wryly.

"And yet that knave took the blue name before us. Although we do not particularly desire it." She sniffed. "We are proud to have been born and gifted with the name of a flower."

"Then you'd probably get along with Rose Milady and Orchid Oracle, huh?" he remarked nonchalantly, but Sentry neither assented to nor rejected the idea.

Instead, she broke the silence that followed with a footstep.

As she began to walk on high heels (that were only slightly shorter than Purple Thorn's), Haruyuki chased after her, cutting across the flattened peak of the mountain toward the southern edge.

The instant he looked down on the stage, he gasped again.

The other buildings had all been transformed into rocky white mountains, and while this was not an unusual sight, the wide Kannana Ring Road reflected the blue sky like a mirror. When he looked closely, it appeared to be covered in a thin layer of water, but the reflectance was not normal. Normally, Kannana turned into a gentle hill in front of his condo, but in this stage, the slope of the terrain appeared to have been flattened.

"Whoa," he said. "It looks like a water stage, but the blue's totally different, huh? So Salt Lake...Does that mean that's all salt water?"

“It’s not just the water.” Sentry kicked at the surface of the mountain with the heel of her right foot. She picked up a small fragment from where it cracked and thrust it toward Haruyuki’s mouth. When he reflexively opened it, the lower part of his mirrored goggles slid smoothly downward, and she tossed the fragment in.

“Mmph— Whoa! Salty!!” He reeled at the intense sting in his mouth.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Sentry laughed agreeably. “You see? The mountains here are rock salt. Fortunate that you are silver. This stage is powerfully corrosive for steel-type metal colors.”

“Gah! Silver can be corroded, too!” He tried to spit out the rock salt, but he had already swallowed it. All avatars had the same naked body underneath their armored exteriors, so it shouldn’t corrode him from the inside, fortunately. Or so he told himself as he looked out at the stage again.

If the entire ground was covered in salt water, then it would make training a little hard, he thought. And then...

“This air...This feeling of the wind hitting your armor,” Sentry murmured next to him. She spread out her arms and took a deep breath. “We have returned.”

Haruyuki finally remembered that this was her first time in the Unlimited Neutral Field in three years, so he turned toward her and said, “Um. Uh, welcome back, Seri.”

“You dare to use such names on this side?” Sentry scolded before taking a step toward him, her arms still spread.

Suddenly, he was wrapped in a forceful embrace. Even though they were both clad in hard armor, he felt a supple elasticity for some reason, and his breath caught. He timidly raised his arms and put them around Sentry’s back.

After a moment, he heard a voice murmur into his ear.

“Thank you, Silver Crow. We had prepared for this for many long hours, but we did not truly believe that the day would come when we could look upon this scene once more. It is thanks to you.”

She squeezed him so tightly, the embrace threatened to make his health gauge drop, then released him at last. She retreated two steps and cocked her head, puzzled. “Why do you grow so rigid?”

“O-oh, uh, it was just an unexpected action, so...”

“Our parent often told us that we were unexpectedly emotional.”

“Your parent...”

Sentry didn’t give Haruyuki the chance to ask who that was and instead clapped her hands together. “Now then, although we have plenty of time, it is not the case that we have more than enough. Shall we begin what we came to do?”

“O-okay!” Just when he thought he was finally going to start his

Omega-style training—

“First, let us look a moment.”

Now it was Haruyuki’s turn to cock his head. “Look? At what?”

“At the ball, obviously. Inti.” Sentry had no sooner spoken than she was throwing herself gracefully off the edge of the mountain.

“A-ah! This is the top floor!” Haruyuki cried, stunned. He hurriedly looked down and saw Sentry’s long platinum hair spread out in a semicircle as she drifted downward at an impossibly gentle speed.

He deployed his wings and jumped before asking as he glided after her, “Wh-why aren’t you just dropping like a rock?”

“The Feather Fall ability.”

This calm answer had him at a brief loss for words. Although she couldn’t fly in the strictest sense of the word, if this ability was always activated, then it meant she wouldn’t take damage falling from great heights, even if she jumped from the top of the old Tokyo Tower.

“Th-that’s an amazing power,” he stammered.

“We do not require you to tell us this.”

While they talked, the blue surface gradually grew closer. It wasn’t only the road; the condo building grounds were also covered in water, and there was no outcrop of terra firma for him to land on. *I hope it’s not too deep!* he prayed as he dropped into the mirrorlike water. *Sploosh!* His legs bisected the upside-down sky.

Fortunately, the water was only about ten centimeters deep, and his armor did not immediately corrode. He lifted his face with a sigh of relief, and Sentry’s face, which had previously been five centimeters higher, was now fifteen centimeters above him.

When he looked down, he saw her feet weren’t sinking into the water. She stood on the surface, small waves rippling out from her heels.

“Wh-why aren’t you sinking?”

“The Surface Walk ability.”

“...”

Haruyuki couldn’t find anything to say in response.

Going by ground, it was over ten kilometers from Koenji in the Suginami area to Kitanomaru Park in Chiyoda Ward, where the Sun God Inti was fixed in position. And all the roads were submerged in concentrated salt water, which made walking impossibly difficult. Thus, Haruyuki suggested that he carry Sentry and fly them there.

“No, perhaps best not to do that.”

His proposal was rejected, and he blinked several times beneath his goggles. “Huh? Wh-why not?”

“Oscillatory are no doubt monitoring Inti’s environs through some means,” she told him. “If we approach via the air, we will be

discovered in an instant.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “Th-that’s true.”

“Well, even if we are discovered, they would not attack immediately. But given that you are on the cusp of an important mission. It would be irritating should we stir their caution.”

“Understood.”

We didn’t come to play, he told himself. All this was to rescue Kuroyukihime. Walking ten or twenty kilometers in salt water was nothing.

“Okay then, let’s go!” Haruyuki lifted his face resolutely and started to splash down the sidewalk along Kannana.

“Oi! Who said you could walk?”

“...Huh?”

When he looked back, Sentry kicked at the salt water with her toes.

“Run, run! And do not merely jog. You must put your left foot out before your right sinks and strive to run along the surface for as long as possible.”

“...Isn’t that the thing that only basilisk lizards can do?”

“Then be one with the lizard!” she cried. “If you are able to take ten continuous steps on top of the water, perhaps Surface Walk will flash inside of you.”

“What? Really?” Suddenly fired up, Haruyuki faced forward again and concentrated his attention on the mirrorlike water. He pulled his right foot out and gently set his sole on the surface. Irregular waves rippled out, and a faint sensation of contact came through to him.

While Silver Crow was a metal color, he was a light one, so even if he put all his weight on his right foot, it should take some amount of time for it to reach the bottom. During that time, he would put his left foot forward and step on the water in the same way. Ten steps all of a sudden was probably out of the question, but at least three—no, four.

“Hngah!” With a battle cry, Haruyuki stepped with his right foot and attempted to put his left foot forward at the same time.

But the resistance of the salt water was even greater than he’d thought, and so he promptly lost his balance and fell face-first into the water. *Kasploosh!* A spectacular jet shot up, and Sentry’s laughter was lost in the sound of it.

As they moved onto Okubo-dori Street via Nakano Station and headed toward Chiyoda Ward, Haruyuki intently continued to practice running on the water. After falling several times, he hit upon the idea that maybe the trick was not to step hard on the water’s surface, but rather to try to minimize his own weight as much as possible. By the time they merged with Waseda Street in Kagurazaka, however, the

number of steps he was able to run on the surface, albeit imperfectly, was a mere two.

With only a kilometer to go, he had to at least increase the number of steps by one more before they arrived at their destination, and so he wanted to keep practicing.

Sentry had other ideas, however. "Your water-running training is at an end for the moment," she told him. "Walk normally from here."

"What?" He let out a cry of dissatisfaction. "There's a kilometer left, Ser—I mean, Maestro! I feel like I'm gonna get it with just a little more!"

"Your attitude is excellent, but we must assume that a radius of a kilometer is within Oscillatory's sphere of vigilance. Best to move forward with as low a profile as possible."

"Oh...I guess. That's true..."

"But, Crow, there truly is something off about you."

"Huh?"

Seri patted the back of a stunned Haruyuki. "Pay it no mind. Let us go." She started to walk again as though gliding across the surface. Her movement, which caused almost no waves, was more typical of a monk than a swordmaster. *How long exactly had she trained to be able to manage this kind of composure?* he wondered as he chased after her, trying to make as little noise as possible in the water.

Their destination of Kitanomaru Park was at the end of Waseda as it ran south, but this was blocked by countless towers of salt standing like a forest, so he couldn't see it. Even so, he felt like the sky ahead was somehow shining more brightly. When they went south down Kagurazaka, the steep incline of the real world was now so flat, it was like it never existed in the first place; upon passing the west side of Iidabashi Station, a conspicuously taller mountain came into view ahead to the right. He was pretty sure it was the mixed-use building Iidabashi Grand Bloom.

"Good. We'll climb that," Sentry said, spreading her arms, and Haruyuki waited for something to happen. He assumed she would now show off some wall-climbing skill like Pard's. But... "What are you doing? Carry us to the top at once."

"Oh...S-sure..."

Hmm, this absurdity's starting to feel familiar...

Haruyuki gently wrapped his arms around Sentry. During his training to run on water, he had slammed into and broken several pillars of salt with his head, so his special-attack gauge was more than 80 percent charged. He deployed the silver wings on his back and slowly ascended on a course that stuck to the wall of the rocky mountain, so as to be as inconspicuous as possible.

"So this is your aviation ability, hmm?" Sentry said. "Would it not

have been better to focus on refining this than taking a sword and some such?"

"Th-that's...I mean, now..."

"Oh-ho, a jest."

They steadily gained altitude, and finally, the peak of the mountain came into view. He hovered for a moment and confirmed there was nothing at the top before landing on the flat summit. Crow released Sentry and stepped to the side.

"...Aah..." He heard a cracked sound slip out of his mouth.

A mere eight hundred meters ahead, in the center of the salt lake spreading out on the north side of the Castle, was a massive ball of flames shining red. The Legend-class Enemy the Sun God Inti.

The truth was he'd harbored a slight hope in his heart. Inti didn't appear in the Storm stage or the Ocean stage. If the reason for this was that the Sun God didn't care for large amounts of water, then maybe the Salt Lake stage, covered in liquid, albeit a thin layer, would weaken the power of its fire somewhat.

But the bright flames of nuclear fusion had not changed at all from when he'd seen them thirty-six hours earlier in the real world—1,500 days earlier in the Accelerated World. When he looked closer, wondering about the fact that there wasn't even any steam, he saw that a white wall of a meter or so had been built around Inti, and this appeared to be blocking the salt water.

"What's that wall?" he muttered.

"Inti's heat caused a large amount of water to evaporate, leaving only a circle of salt," Sentry told him. "It appears to be true that the flames of that ball cannot be extinguished with water."

"Not even in the Ocean stage...I guess?"

She shrugged. "Unknown. The depths of the Ocean stage would swallow it completely. One cannot say what would happen there unless one witnessed it."

"I...guess so." Haruyuki looked once again at Inti.

The massive ball of flames, twenty meters across, engulfed seven death markers: Black Lotus, Green Grandé, Blue Knight, Purple Thorn, Yellow Radio, Black Vise, and Wolfram Cerberus. Now completely fused with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, and transformed into the terrifying berserker Wolfram Disaster, Cerberus had managed a draw in a fight with the Green King immediately before Inti dropped down. The young genius who had sharpened his sword against Haruyuki in normal duels was gone now. Even if Inti were to disappear, the one who regenerated would not be Cerberus but the Disaster. In which case, maybe it was better for him to sleep inside the flames.

Haruyuki pushed the thought aside. They had to destroy Inti. Even

if that meant Black Vise and Wolfram Disaster also came back to life, their biggest priority was rescuing Kuroyukihime from the Unlimited EK. Because although she could still participate in normal duels and the Territories, the Unlimited Neutral Field was the true Accelerated World.

“Crow,” Sentry said abruptly.

He looked up at her. “Y-yes?”

“We are sure you are aware of this, but cutting into that ball will be no easy feat. Not only is it vexingly large, it’s also a sphere, and thus, although you may seek out the minuscule, as you’d done with Einherjar’s armor, you won’t be able to see the actual body, given that it is covered in dazzling flames. In other words, you will have to manifest the deepest secrets of Omega style without relying on your vision.”

“Ah...”

She was exactly right. But up until now—when he cut Glacier Behemoth’s horn, when he cut Einherjar’s armor—he had focused all his mind on his vision and sought out the singular point to cut. If she was asking if he could do the same thing with his eyes closed, he would have to say it would be absolutely impossible.

“Could you do it, Maestro?” Haruyuki asked without thinking, and Sentry glared at him through her visor.

“And if we were to say we could indeed, what would you do with that?”

“...”

He hung his head.

Give her Lucid Blade and get her to be the attacker instead. There was no way he’d be allowed to do that. His comrades in Nega Nebulus trusted him, placed their hope in him, and even went so far as to throw him a send-off party.

“I’m sorry. Please forget I asked.”

“Hmph.” Sentry turned her gaze to the massive ball of flames in the distance once more. “We, too, spoke words of no use. Whatever the situation, you have no choice but to do it. Do not fear. We will train you to a level where you will be able to cut it.”

“Please and thank you.” Haruyuki bowed his head, and she patted his shoulder lightly.

“All right. Now you’ve seen what you needed to see. Shall we withdraw?”

“Okay. Are we going back to Suginami?”

“It’s not necessarily the case that that is required. Anywhere is acceptable as long as we can train for extended hours without interruption...But if we move too far from Tokyo, it would be a problem were an irregular event to occur.”

“That’s true.” But no place that met their requirements immediately came to mind. In the Unlimited Neutral Field, it was possible for Enemies to pop up anywhere, and wherever the two of them could go, other Burst Linkers could, too. About the only exception was inside the Castle, but they’d get nowhere if they died trying to crash the four gates.

“That settles it. We’ll go there?” Sentry murmured.

Haruyuki looked up intently at the sharp visor. “Where is ‘there?’”

“Come.” The word had no sooner left her mouth than she was jumping from the roof. Haruyuki chased after the shadow that drifted gently downward.

After landing on the ground, Sentry started to head back to Waseda. They passed Iidabashi Station, crossed Sotobori Boulevard, and started down Kagurazaka. But this time, they didn’t turn left onto Okubo-dori Street. Instead, they continued northwest. When they hit Gaien Higashi-dori, they turned right and headed farther north. Haruyuki didn’t neglect to practice his water walking, and around the time they approached Shinmejiro-dori, he had a sudden thought: He was pretty sure they’d gone down this road when Fuko had dropped him at Kansenen Park. Which meant...

“Are we maybe going to your house, Seri?” he asked the back of the Burst Linker walking ahead and got the mysterious reply “Half-correct.” Still unable to grasp her true intent, he chased after the swinging platinum hair.

If they were going to Seri’s real-world house, then they would turn left on Shinmejiro-dori, but Sentry crossed the street and kept going straight. Soon, he saw a mountain range even larger than Iidabashi Grand Bloom. It was not only tall but running north-south in a line, and he was pretty sure it was a famous old hotel in the real world.

Without hesitation, Seri headed toward the mountain and passed through a narrow ravine that opened up in the center. On the other side, a pond about two hundred meters across appeared. This was likely the garden at the hotel where countless trees grew in reality, but in this stage, the mirrorlike salt lake reflected only the blue sky.

No. There was some kind of white mist hanging about the center of the water, and Sentry walked straight toward it. Sensing a solemnity in the air, he stopped his water running. His feet splashed as he advanced, and the mist abruptly grew thicker, blanketing his field of view.

Ting! The faint sound of a bell rang out.

No, it wasn’t a bell. The source of the noise was a large key that had come to dangle from Sentry’s right hand at some point. *Ting!* The key made the sound again, and the white mist parted to either side.

“Ah!” Haruyuki let out a small cry.

In the place where, from the outer edge of the salt lake, there had looked to be nothing, a bungalow surrounded by a tall wooden fence materialized. With a proud gate and a tiled roof, it was a Japanese-style manor.

When Sentry approached the tightly closed gate, she put the key into the steel lock. *Chak!* He heard the sound of it unlocking and finally understood.

“This is your house?!” he cried. “Is this a player home?!”

“Indeed.” Sentry nodded and pushed opened the gate.

Haruyuki had only seen two other player homes in the Unlimited Neutral Field. One was Fuko's house on the top of the old Tokyo Tower in Fufuan. And the other was Saffron Blossom and Chrome Falcon's house in Akatsuki Futo Park in Odaiba. They both had incredible designs, too, but in terms of size, Sentry's was the clear winner.

Because this was the Salt Lake stage, the garden inside the fence was also submerged in water, and the Japanese-style house reflected in that water was about twenty meters across. It was maybe a three—no, four-bedroom layout. The majestic appearance of the black-tiled roof made him want to call it a samurai residence.

"How many points did you need to buy this house?" Haruyuki asked, standing stock-still in the center of the submerged garden.

She shrugged. "You seem likely to recoil, so we shan't tell you."

"I—I won't recoil."

"Nay, such a thing matters not."

"Th-then at least tell me this. Does it have a name?"

Sentry turned her face away and fiddled with her hair for a while before answering. "Oumutei."

"*O-oh-moo-tei*? Is it like some kind of meditation place?"

"No meditation or yoga here. It is written with the characters for 'sakura' and 'dream,' pronounced *oumu*. And of course *tei* is for 'mansion.'"

"Huh, that's a pretty name. Although there aren't any sakura trees."

"Due to this being the Salt Lake stage," she explained curtly. "In the majority of stages, there is a large sakura tree growing over there. It will no doubt appear when the Change comes."

Staring at the southeast corner of the lot at the spot Sentry indicated, Haruyuki started to ask when the Change would come but stopped himself. He didn't know exactly when it would come, this Change that happened about once a week, but he would definitely encounter it. Because he was going to spend the next four months here training in Omega style.

He'd never stayed in the Accelerated World for so long before. Four months was even longer than that painfully long first semester at school. He felt a little faint at the thought, but this was no time to falter. "Maestro, thank you for training me!"

"Mmm." The swordmaster nodded, composed. "We will not be kind."

"That's exactly what I want!"

"Then shall we begin?"

"Huh?"

"What is this 'huh'?"

"Oh, it's just..." He shrugged. "We walked a lot and all, so I figured we'd have some tea first. And snacks or somethin—"

"Ngaaah!" Sentry roared, causing Haruyuki to shrink into himself.

"Eep!"

"What manner of idleness is this?! You most likely think four months is a deadly long period, but we *only* have four months! Now come! Ready your blade!"

"O-okaaaay!" He snapped to attention and, stammering, called the voice command. "E-e-e-equip Lucid Blade!"

Fortunately, the command was recognized, and a white light poured down from the sky to materialize a slender longsword on his left hip.

After watching this process, Sentry said in an unenthusiastic voice, "Come, Claíomh Solais."

This time, a beam of blue light shot down and gathered on Sentry's left hip. The light flashed brightly before disappearing, and when it was gone, a sword appeared, with an extremely flowing design. It was a Western-style longsword about twice as large as Haruyuki's blade.

He stared at it intently, and Sentry asked suspiciously, "Why do you gape thusly?"

"Oh!" He looked up at her face. "Uh, I just assumed your sword would be a Japanese one."

"We might also face you with such a blade, if you wish?"

"Huh? Do you also have a Japanese sword?"

"We have an assortment of twenty swords that are our main weapons, a range of Western and Japanese, small and large," she informed him.

"...Twenty..."

And then with this house, too, this is some real veteran power!

Haruyuki kept the thought to himself and shook his head slightly. "N-no, there's no need to switch."

To be honest, he couldn't help but sense something superrare in a name like Claíomh Solais, but there was no point in worrying about

the specs of a sword belonging to an opponent far and away more powerful than he was. He gripped his beloved sword and sighed. Sentry then drew her own blade.

In contrast with his Lucid Blade, which shone reddish because of the fire damage immunity enhancement, Claíomh Solais was tinged a faint gold. It wasn't clear whether this was because of some kind of enhancement or if it was its original coloring.

The two Burst Linkers readied their weapons in the orthodox position in front of their bodies. The intense sunlight of the Salt Lake stage reflected off the metal blades, releasing beams of pure-white light.

Here, finally, Haruyuki realized he had drawn his sword without having been given any instructions. "Uh, um, what do I do next?"

"Fool. What good is it to simply display your weapon? We can begin nothing until we battle."

"O-oh, but!"

But that's definitely going to end with me dying instantly!

Unable to say this, in his compressed thoughts, he searched for a way to escape and had a sudden realization. This was not just some subterfuge but something he needed to make very certain of before fighting. "Maestro, are you all right for burst points?"

"Oh-ho!" A faint smile bled out from beneath her mask. "At last you asked the question."

"I'm...I'm really sorry," he apologized. "I didn't think of it until now. Your points would have been zero when you hit total point loss. How many points do you have now?"

"It seems that when the BB program was sent to us once again, the count returned to the initial value of one hundred," she told him. "We used ten of those points to dive, so now we sit with ninety."

"Nngh." He groaned unconsciously. It was one thing for a newbie who was just exchanging a single point for a normal duel, but that number was very anxiety-inducing when you were moving in the Unlimited Neutral Field. If something happened, she could quite likely lose all her points again. "I-I'll share some points with you right now! Give me a charge card and—"

"No need," Sentry declared, sword still readied. "You are about to do battle with Inti and Oscillatory Universe. You mustn't waste a single point."

"It's not a waste!" he cried. "There's no guarantee you'll be able to come back to life again if you lose all your points this time, you know?!"

"Guarantee? No, in fact, it's impossible now. We exhausted something essential in regeneration."

"Something essential?" He cocked his head.

“We’ll discuss it at some point,” she replied briefly. “For the present, there is no need for you to concern yourself with our points. None can enter Oumutei, and we have no interest in defeat at your hand. In time, we shall hunt Enemies to replenish our supply.”

“...I understand.” Haruyuki was forced to nod, but feeling like he couldn’t just leave it like that, he added, “But I’ll accompany you when you do.”

“Yes, yes. Now then...given that your concerns have been resolved, let us battle.”

“Okay.”

He felt strangely certain now that he knew how many points Sentry had left, and he readied again the sword he had lowered without realizing. Sentry’s form, on the other hand, hadn’t wavered in the slightest from the moment she first held up her sword. Unlike any of the powerful fighters he’d come up against before, she had a mysterious gravity. Even though she was standing there in front of him, it was almost like she was melting into the background bit by bit.

Shf.

He felt like a cold breeze blew past, followed by the sound of water splashing at his feet. Wondering if a fish or something had jumped up, he lowered his eyes for an instant and found a chunk of silver metal shining in the transparent salt water. It hadn’t been there before, he noted doubtfully. And then he realized it was a piece of Silver Crow’s left shoulder armor.

“...?!” Stunned, he leapt back and looked at his shoulder. The edge of the armor and its outward protrusion had been sliced off with an impossible smoothness. The cross section glinted sharply like a blade and threatened to cut his finger if he so much as touched it.

“Wh-when?! ” Flabbergasted, he looked up again. Sentry was still standing there in her relaxed stance. A long-distance severing attack like Magenta Scissor’s Remote Cut? Or—it couldn’t be—an Incarnate technique?

“You look like a pigeon—well, one must suppose a crow—that’s been hit with a BB gun,” she said, and he could hear the laughter in her voice.

“I-it’s just—I totally don’t know when you...,” he squeezed out.

“Let us make this clear now: This is no special attack or ability, nor of course an Incarnate technique. We merely closed the distance between us, swung our sword, and cut your armor.”

“What?! ” he cried. “I didn’t take my eyes off you for a second, though!”

“Indeed, you did not,” she agreed. “But even so, you could not see us.”

“...How...?”

“This is one of the inner mysteries of the Omega-style Whole Blade: *Gou*. As it is also an effective technique against Enemies, you would do well to learn it.”

“*Gou...?*”

I want to learn it, but I have no idea what happened.

As if to cut through Haruyuki’s confusion, Sentry lightly moved the tip of her sword. “Come. Ready yourself once more.”

“...Okay.”

This time for sure I’m not gonna miss it, Haruyuki resolved in his heart and raised his sword.

The two swords’ tips were a meter apart. Close but not so close that the blades could cut either avatar without crossing that short distance.

Sentry didn’t move from where she stood on the water. The platinum hair that reached her feet swayed in the breeze and shone in the sunlight. Small waves rippled across the salt lake, breaking the upside-down reflection of the samurai mansion into countless tiny fragments.

Shf.

This time, his right shoulder armor was severed and sank into the salt water with a *plsh*.

“...”

Unable to even open his mouth, Haruyuki stood rooted to the spot, dumbfounded.

She had cut him. He knew that much. But he didn’t know when she’d stepped forward, swung her sword, and returned to her original position. It was like she became invisible when she moved—except, no, that wasn’t it. In the instant of the attack, she had disappeared from his awareness. So even though he was supposed to have been completely focused on Sentry, he had been aware of the mirror image of the house reflected in the rippling water.

“Does this also work on a logic of laying the maximum on the minuscule?” he rasped. The mouth he could see beneath her visor carved itself into a grin.

“Of course.”

“How?”

“If we were to simply *tell* you, you would not understand. Now you come at us.”

She gestured for him to come with the index finger of the hand gripping her sword. His instincts were shouting not to attack, but he wouldn’t get any training done if he started flinching now.

“Okay.” He slowly inhaled deep into his virtual lungs. He pulled one foot out of the salt water and placed it on the surface.

“...Hah!” He stepped forward with a cry. Showing off the results

of his training, he ran just two—*plap, plap*—steps across the water's surface and closed the distance. He brought his raised sword toward Sentry's left shoulder. He was aiming for the one point that jutted out from her armor ever so slightly—cut the minuscule with the maximum!

However, Sentry's form instantly blurred.

It wasn't that she'd disappeared. It was almost like she'd become embedded into the background. And not on the level that the water was blue and so was her armor. The very existence of her duel avatar faded and became part of the world around it.

The white blade he brought down with all the speed he could muster sliced through empty space in vain.

Immediately after that, his axis leg was casually swept out from under him, and Haruyuki fell face-first into the salt water, sending up a massive spray.

Although he attacked ten times in a row, not only was he not able to cut Sentry's armor, he couldn't even manage to scratch it. Even so, he readied his blade and was about to make his eleventh attempt.

However...

"Let us rest," Sentry said.

She lowered her sword, so he had no choice but to do the same. Instantly, the strength drained out of his body, and he slumped to the ground.

"Why can't I reach you?!" Haruyuki shouted petulantly.

"We shall explain, so let us have tea." Sentry pointed at the house with her thumb. "There are also snacks."

"Okay." Calming his tantrum instantly, Haruyuki quickly stood up.

The inside of Oumutei was pure Japanese style. There was a main room with an open corridor along the garden, a kitchen next to that, and three bedrooms and a tea salon along the hallway. All the rooms had tatami mats covering the floors, and in the end, the floor plan was found to be just as he'd initially assumed: four bedrooms, kitchen, and living room.

After leading Haruyuki to the salon, Sentry took a tea set out of her home storage and prepared matcha tea with a practiced hand. It was his first time drinking matcha in either the real world or the Accelerated World, but the refreshing bitterness was a welcome balm to his exhausted brain.

He ate half the *yokan* jelly she laid out after the tea and sighed before asking the thing he was dying to ask her about. "Maestro, why do I stop being able to see you? What is the secret of Omega style, this Gou?"

“We offer this question in return. Crow, through what means do you see this world?”

“Huh? With my eyes, of course.” He pointed to the eye lenses beneath his mirrored goggles.

Sentry cocked her head slightly from where she sat formally on her knees. “Mm-hmm. Then do your eyeballs now see us with the same structure as your flesh-and-blood eyes, with the same logic?”

“Huh...?” For a moment, he was at a loss for words.

Flesh-and-blood human beings—no, pretty much all animals saw things by transforming the light entering their pupils into signals on the retina, and then the brain once again transformed these signals into images. But the Accelerated World was a virtual realm, a VR world generated by the Main Visualizer. It was incredibly realistic, but it seemed impossible that every physical phenomenon would be re-created as is.

“No...I don’t think the program would actually simulate everything down to the behavior of each particle of light. The sights I can see with my eyes...They’re probably streamed directly into my brain—I mean, the quantum circuits.”

“Well, that is indeed the likely case,” Sentry agreed. “In other words, taking this to the extreme, a duel avatar’s eyes become a simple adornment.”

“Uh...Um.” That was maybe true, but it was hard to just nod and accept someone telling you your eyeballs were merely decorative. Haruyuki blinked several times.

“Oh-ho. Can’t accept this?”

“No, it’s just, well...”

“So then if the sights we see are produced by the system, this creates space for interference.”

“What...do you mean?”

“Hear me. Our perceptions, our thoughts: Both are currently accelerated a thousand times. When conducting high-speed battle in such an environment, given the capacity of the Main Visualizer, a lag—albeit small—is generated in the creation of the images that attend to the movements of our eye lenses. Thus, during battle, the system *anticipates a moment into the future and shows us that image.*”

“Huh?!”

Sentry lifted her teacup in a smooth motion and brought it to her mouth beneath her visor. She drank the last of her matcha, and the thick slice of *yokan* jelly also disappeared in one bite. Shifting from her formal position on her knees to sit more casually cross-legged, she continued her explanation.

“This future prediction is frightfully accurate, and there are no mistakes as a general rule because the system is making these

predictions based on our thoughts, the signals that transmit the image control system. If we were to put it in terms of the detail-focusing system applied in the VR games of yore, would you understand?"

"No, not really."

"...Well, no matter. At any rate, the key here is if you can understand the mechanism of this future prediction, it is possible to deliberately make it miss the mark."

"Make the future prediction...miss the mark?" Haruyuki parroted and pulled back slightly while still sitting formally on his knees. "Are you saying you kind of do stuff with the image control system?"

"At last you show some insight."

"I just feel like this is getting pretty Incarnate-ish again," he murmured, and Sentry's lightning bolt struck.

"Fool! How many times must we tell you?! Omega style is from start to finish a sword of logic, and this secret technique is no different. It does use the image control system—that much is true. But this use is the converse of an Incarnate technique. Completely eliminate the image produced from the quantum circuit...And when you do, what happens?"

"...The system can't predict the future?"

"Aye." Sentry slapped her knee with some force and leaned forward. "In truth, it is only on the level of the predictive system making a momentary error, but that is sufficient for reading the future of the future. Crow, the reason you were unable to witness the moment of our slashing attack is because our form was weakened in the visual field drawn up by the system."

"Weakened," he murmured. This was indeed the word that made the most sense to explain the phenomenon when the tip of his armor had been cut. But the logic behind it that Sentry was trying to impart to him, on the other hand, didn't make any sense at all.

"Oh, but, like, can you actually erase the image?" he asked finally. "And even if you could, wouldn't your avatar not be able to move anymore?"

"Indeed." She nodded. "But remember. You lost sight of us when we were standing at the ready, not having moved a single step, yes?"

"Uh-huh," he agreed slowly. "So then if your avatar is made completely still, you can force a bug into the predictive system?"

"It's a bit different from that. Because the moment you attempt to be still, the image of 'not moving' is created. Rather than thinking you will not move, you fill your mind with nothing. Erase oneself and become one with the world—*this* is the truth of Omega style's deepest art, *Gou*."

"...Nothing." He was about to say he was particularly talented at spacing out, but then he realized it wasn't as simple as that. This was

different from standing rooted to the spot with no one around. In this case, an enemy stood before you, trying to defeat you.

“Um”—he paused—“this is different from the idea of fighting free from outside thoughts, isn’t it?”

“It is,” she agreed. “When one fights free of outside thought, while it is true that they are not thinking about anything in particular, that condition is one in which the image control system surpasses the movement system. That is to say, indescribable images are produced with great vigor. To reach the complete nothingness of which I speak, one must also eliminate even their unconscious mind.”

“Eliminate even your unconscious? And do it in front of an enemy?” Haruyuki muttered before sitting up straight and shaking his head. “No way. It’s impossible no matter how you look at it. I mean, even just in a duel for play with a friend, your heart’s pounding, the adrenaline’s flowing, and yet in a real fight against a real enemy, I mean...”

“We did say it was the deepest art, did we not?” Sentry reminded him gently, lightly flicking Haruyuki’s goggles where he sat formally on his knees. “If it were so easily acquired, we would not have maintained our position. You needn’t become able to use it immediately. But at some point, you must arrive at the state of *Gou*. To awaken to the second of the deepest arts of the Omega-style Whole Blade, *Setsu*.”

Just how many deepest arts are there anyway?

Haruyuki was too scared to ask that, so instead he asked, “Um, are there other sword schools in the Accelerated World besides your Omega style, Maestro?”

“Indeed there are.” Sentry nodded as if it were only natural and counted them off on her fingers. “To list only the most famous, there is first Blue Knight’s Infinite style—this would no doubt have been taught to Cobra-Manga, as well. Graphite Edge’s Ain style—Lotus is of this school. And Oscillatory’s Platinum Cavalier has named his own sword as Femto style, but...”

She gave the names of three different schools, but only one was burned into Haruyuki’s memory. Graphite Edge’s style, Ain. Likely written with the Japanese characters for “bright” and “shadow,” the word probably referred to the pair of longswords he had—Lux (*light*) and Umbra (*dark*). But the fact that Kuroyukihime had been trained in this school meant that at some point, she would likely instruct him in Ain style as well, given that he expected her to train him in the sword at some point.

“Sentry...”

Is it okay to learn another school with Omega style? Haruyuki was about to ask, but if she told him no, then he wouldn’t have any way

around that, so he subbed in another question again: “Can I have some more *yokan*?”

“Eat your fill.”

Sentry operated her storage, and a plate with two slices of *yokan* on it appeared before him. He picked one up, and as he munched on it, he decided he would leave thinking about the future to the future.

After the break, he was ordered to swing his blade against nothing as practice with his sword, and that night, he slept in the six-mat tatami room given to him.

The real training started the next day and was far more difficult than anything Haruyuki had imagined.

In the mornings in the garden of Oumutei, he had lessons in swinging his blade, driving forward, and attacking opponents, and in the afternoons, they went outside, and he brandished his sword for all he was worth against a sturdy object or took on actual battle with lesser-class Enemies and replenished his points at the same time. Despite the fact that he was ready to keel over from exhaustion at this alone, once he returned to Oumutei, he would absolutely have to present himself to Sentry, and since this went on until he had lost his entire health gauge, he would always die. When he regenerated an hour later, he finally got to have supper, and then he would sleep like the dead until morning.

Even after a week and then two weeks of this, Haruyuki couldn’t come close to beating his master. Even though she was kindly not using the *Gou* she’d revealed to him on the first day, not only could he not bring her health gauge down, he couldn’t even get his sword to hit her.

Centaurea Sentry’s fighting style was different from any of the opponents he’d ever dueled. No matter who the Burst Linker was, there was normally movement and stillness in a fight. When they were attacking and when they weren’t. This was just a matter of course ever since the era of 2D fighting games in the previous century, and yet these two states were strangely ambiguous with Sentry. When she attacked, there was no opening, and just when he thought he was guarded, a slashing attack would come at him from some unexpected angle. No matter what Haruyuki set up, she dealt with it neatly, as though she had absorbed all his strategies into her. To express it in a more sensory manner, her every action was thoroughly lukewarm.

Three weeks. Four weeks.

Haruyuki continued to die every evening. The Change came several times, and the stage switched from Salt Lake to Primeval Forest to Plague to Factory, but Sentry understood intimately the features of every stage, and he couldn’t use the gimmicks to catch her

off guard, either.

Before he knew it, two months had passed, then three. He had never dived continuously for this long before. And naturally, he had never trained for this long, either. And yet it was impossible to think he was making any progress, so he gradually started to feel anxious.

Their time limit was four months. Or more precisely, 125 days, so in another 35 days, the Arita home server would automatically burst out both of them. He had to learn *something* before then, even if it wasn't the deepest arts, but he couldn't see even the merest hint that he was anywhere near the next stage.

The evening of the ninetieth day, Haruyuki woke up in the middle of the night for the first time. As he lay on his futon, laid out on the floor of the Japanese-style room, he turned his ears to the chirping of insects for a while. Three days earlier, the stage had changed to Heian. It was the most perfect match for the samurai-manor style of Oumutei, but he had no attention to spare for the scenery.

In the bluish darkness, he stared at the ceiling, thinking. Maybe his panic wasn't because he couldn't see the results of his training. The fear of disappointing Centaurea Sentry, who had been kind enough to take on the role of instructor, had settled into the pit of his stomach a while ago.

Now that he thought about it, Haruyuki had always lived his life in fear of disappointing someone. His mother and father. Chiyuri and Takumu. His Nega Nebulus comrades. Kuroyukihime. He kicked and struggled as hard as he could so that he wouldn't disappoint any of the people he met. He'd somehow made it through his previous trials, but maybe he just couldn't this time. Maybe, unable to acquire Omega style, unable to fulfill the important role of attacker, he would betray the expectations of so many people.

He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to shoo away the bothersome thought, but sleep did not return. When he gave up and rose from his futon, he checked on Sentry sleeping soundly in the next room before sneaking down the hall. He cut across the main room toward the veranda that opened up onto the garden. When he pulled back the sliding door, pale moonlight poured down on him.

Although bright-red fall leaves danced on the night wind, the ancient sakura tree in a corner of the garden was in full bloom. He sat down on the veranda and looked out at the feast of the moon, the blossoms, and the autumn leaves.

He had the sudden desire to talk to Metatron. If he opened up to the Archangel, who acted like he was her servant, she would scold him without mercy before giving him just a little encouragement in the end. But at that moment, she was in full self-sealed mode in faraway Fufuan, healing her wounded body. He couldn't call on her

before that process was complete.

What if Sentry scolded him? If she really let him have it for not getting anything even though she was out there working with him every single day, would he be able to breathe a little easier?

He laughed self-deprecatingly at his thoughts, since even self-pity had a limit, and hugged his knees to himself.

“Drink?”

He heard a voice from behind, and when he looked back, the supposedly sleeping Sentry was standing there, holding a white sake bottle.

“Oh! No...I’m going back to bed, so...”

“Come, now—don’t say that.” Sentry pushed him back down just as he was about to stand, then sat beside him. She offered him a small vermillion sake cup that he automatically accepted. Soon transparent liquid was pouring from the bottle into his saucer.



“...What is this?”

“The full moon, a sakura tree at night, and the autumn leaves as the accompaniment. Unlikely to be water, hmm?”

“B-but I’m underage...”

“Fool. As am I. It’s fine. Drink.”

When she gave him the order, he couldn’t very well refuse. He brought the cup to his lips and knocked it back. The sweet, spicy, bitter, sour liquid slid down his throat, and his stomach grew hot. Japanese sake, he supposed, but he couldn’t say with certainty, since he had never drunk it before, in either the real world or the Accelerated World.

Sentry also emptied her cup and let out a satisfied sigh. “We intended to reserve this for our last night, but then the Heian stage came along...”

“Is alcohol expensive over here?” he asked.

“Hmm?” She glanced at him. “Well, depends on the quality, but it’s certainly not cheap. This wasn’t purchased in a shop, however; we drew it from the spring of sake that wells up in the belly of Fuji.”

“Huh. So then if you drew loads and sold it in Tokyo, you could earn big?”

Sentry grinned at Haruyuki’s greed. “The spring is such that all who have thought in that manner have ended on the verge of total point loss.”

“...Th-they did?” When he shrank into himself, his empty cup was filled once more. He tossed it back and felt it was strangely more delicious than the last cup. Feeling a pleasant warmth in the depths of his body, he looked up at the night sky.

The way the autumn leaves and sakura petals mixed and flowed with the wind was indeed the very picture of grace. He understood well the reason this house had been given the name “a dream of sakura.” Or maybe the very act of drinking sake like this with Sentry was itself a dream the old sakura tree was having.

Perhaps caught up in this feeling, Haruyuki gave voice to a question he hadn’t intended to ask:

“Seri, why are you being so nice to me?”

And he called her by her real name instead of her avatar name to boot, but he couldn’t take it back now.

Sentry gazed at the full moon reflected in her cup for a while before drinking it down and answering him in a different tone. “Nice? Even though I kill you every day?”

“...You *are* nice,” he insisted. “We’ve been training for three months, and I just get killed every day without making any progress. But you’re still here doing it with me.”

Tears threatened to well in his eye lenses, and Haruyuki hung his head. But the words didn't stop coming.

"I thought...I could grab hold of something a bit more, sooner. That if I trained, I'd be able to get that much stronger. But my sword skills haven't changed at all from day one. Not only can I not catch the minuscule, but I don't even scratch you. I'm sure I never had any talent for it right from the start. It was a mistake to take the sword for my level-up bonus..."

Haruyuki squeezed this out in a hoarse voice, tears falling beneath his goggles. Despite the fact that they were his own words, sharp thorns scratched at his throat and cut his tongue.

A few seconds later, he heard Sentry's voice.

"Mmm, I see."

Haruyuki expected her to tell him that if that was the case, they should end it now. But that wasn't what he got.

"So the reason you've been down these days is because you were thinking about this stuff, huh? Sorry if I made you feel like you're not progressing. It's the first time I've ever taught anyone anything, so I don't know how to get that balance right."

"...?"

Unable to understand what she meant, Haruyuki lifted his head just a little.

"You're all right." Sentry patted his back. "You're definitely making progress."

"Please don't try to make me feel better," Haruyuki said as he squirmed away. "I know better than anyone if I'm making progress or not. I mean, when I was training in Incarnate, I had a little more of a response. But the sword...The more I train, the further away you get, Seri."

"So then let me ask you." Sentry peered at his face and asked in a hushed tone, "Arita, did you think that in a mere three months of training, you could catch up with me?"

"Huh?" After blinking several times, he shook his head firmly. "No, I never thought anything like that. Catching up means beating you in a duel, right? I know I can't make it to that level. But...I can't even make a centimeter—no, a millimeter-long scratch on you. You're just too...You're just too far away."

"It's the same thing," Sentry replied, and this time she slapped a hand against the center of his chest. "Omega style is a special-attack sword. If you slice in a centimeter, limbs go flying, a heart is cut out. If your sword manages to reach me, you can consider yourself having won at that moment."

"..."

When he was unable to respond, Sentry gently pulled away and

poured more sake into the cup he still held in one hand. She then filled her own, and the bottle was empty.

Rather than drain this last cup in one go, Sentry took a sip and returned to her previous tone to say, "If you wish to conclude your training, then that is acceptable, as well. A portal stands slightly to the west, at Waseda Station."

"..."

Mouth still shut tight, Haruyuki looked at the moon reflected in his sake saucer. He raised the cup gently so that the moon wouldn't waver, brought it to his lips, and tilted it back, intending to drink the moon in a single gulp.

"I'll keep going."

And then he was overcome with a sudden sleepiness. His body slumped forward, and when he pulled it up, this time he fell backward. Letting the tatami mat hold him, he looked up at Sentry's face.

"I see."

This was all she said in reply, and then Sentry took another sip of her sake. Unable to fight the feeling of sleepiness, Haruyuki closed his eyes.

His teacher's profile lingered for a while on the backs of his eyelids.

July 23, 4:55 AM.

Koto Takanouchi/Cobalt Blade touched the bottle of carbonated water she had brought from the first-floor kitchen to the slender neck of her twin sister, who was sitting on the edge of her bed shaking her head.

“Yaah!” Springing upward, Yuki Takanouchi/Manganese Blade glared at her sister. “Come ooooo! What are you doing, Kotooooo?”

“It’s because you’re all dreamy-headed, Yuki. Drink this and wake up.”

“Unnnh.” Groaning, Yuki accepted the bottle. Koto sat beside her and opened her own bottle before drinking in big gulps. The almost-burning stimulation of the bubbles cleared away what little sleep remained in her head.

Yuki also seemed to be completely awake at last, as she produced a voice that was a little more serious. “What do you really think, Kotooooo?”

“About what?”

“About whether or not Oscillatory’s got one more trap set uuup.”

“Hmm.”

At the meeting of the five Legions the previous evening, Koto and Yuki had insisted they should prioritize the direct attack on Oscillatory Universe over the Sun God Inti mission. It was an assertion based on their caution about the meticulousness of the White King, but in point of fact, it wasn’t as though Koto had any evidence of a trap. She simply had a bad feeling.

This chill had come over her when she and Yuki went to Minato Area No. 3 to check the matching list several hours before the meeting. The only name registered on the list was that of the White King, White Cosmos. When she’d seen that, Koto had felt Cosmos’s cold hand stroking the back of her neck.

The woman was challenging them. She was saying that she wouldn’t run or hide, so they could come fight her at any time. That was what Koto thought. Naturally, she couldn’t challenge the White King to a fight on her own judgment, so Koto and Yuki had returned

to Shinjuku in silence. To be more accurate, they had run home with their tails between their legs.

At first, they both thought Cosmos's challenge was a trap. But soon, they revised their thinking. Neither Enemies nor ambushes could be brought into the Normal Duel Field. If it actually was that the White King simply hadn't deleted her name from the list out of sheer pride, then it had to be Inti where the trap lay. Koto and Yuki both reached that conclusion when they took part in the meeting, but...

"To be honest, I don't know," Koto murmured, glancing at her sister. They were both wearing similar pajamas, and their hair was down, so there was basically no difference in their appearances. "Maybe both are traps; maybe neither is. But if it's just like CCC's Lemon Pierrette said and we have to do both, then..."

"There's no big difference in which we do first, huuuh?" Sighing, Yuki put the cap back on the bottle and set it down on the bed's headboard. Koto did the same and checked the time. 4:58 AM.

They were scheduled to meet with the other Legions at exactly five. Just in case, she would have preferred to dive a minute early, but all the participants in this mission had agreed to hold off until ten seconds in advance. A mere minute in the real world was sixteen hours and forty minutes in the Unlimited Neutral Field, so the extra time increased the possibility of being picked up by the White Legion's monitoring—if there was any.

"Wonder if Corvus'll come," Yuki murmured.

Koto nodded right away. "He'll come."

"But if we fail in the Inti attack, he'll end up in Unlimited EK, too."

"Even so, he'll come," Koto asserted and lay back. This was Yuki's bed, but it had the exact same mattress with the same topper as her own, so she didn't feel any difference.

Yuki lay down next to her. They connected their Neurolinkers directly, and Koto plugged another cable into the direct terminal on their home server. She set the automatic disconnect timer, and their preparation was complete. Time remaining: thirty seconds.

"We have to make this a success," Yuki said.

"Absolutely, for the honor of our Infinite style."

Yuki giggled; it was the first time she'd heard the name of their sword school in a while. But Koto understood how she felt. They'd thought the name was incredibly cool when they were still in elementary school, but for ninth graders, it was—

Koto cut off her random thoughts and said, "We dive on the count of three. Three, two, one..."

"“Unlimited Burst.””"

It was their first trip to the Unlimited Neutral Field since the meeting of the Seven Kings, and blue moonlight fell heavily over the stage. The buildings had all been transformed into gothic structures made of white stone.

Descending to stand on the stage in the form of Cobalt Blade, Koto looked up at the night sky and murmured, "A Moonlight stage... Unfortunate it's not a water stage of some kind, but we did get a fairly good one here."

"True. No strange gimmicks, and it's a help that there's nothing flammable," Manganese Blade replied, standing next to her.

Koto snuck a glance at her profile, even though it was familiar by now. Her own tone hadn't changed between the real world and the Accelerated World—she was maybe just a little briefer here—but the change in her sister was dramatic, almost into another person. So Koto ended up wanting to double-check if this was really the sister who'd been next to her immediately before the dive.

But Yuki accepted Koto's gaze without complaint and continued, "But dawn doesn't come in the Moonlight stage, so if there is an Oscillatory ambush, it'll be harder to spot. Have to make sure our scouting's tight."

"Good point." She nodded, her full warrior armor clacking.

The mustering point for the mission was Gijo Plaza at the Ministry of Defense, the same as the meeting the day before. This was less than a kilometer away from where Koto and Yuki lived in Sugacho in Shinjuku, and they still had two hours and forty minutes before the mustering time of five AM, but she wasn't in the mood for dawdling. Koto checked for the feel of the sword on her hip and started walking north. Along the way, they smashed small objects to charge their special-attack gauges.

They avoided the major roads and had advanced three hundred meters when they hit Koshu Kaido. They would have no choice but to expose themselves at this crossing, so they hid in the shadow of a building for a moment while Koto checked the east side and Yuki the west. When they had confirmed and reconfirmed that there was no sign of any Enemies or observers, they quickly cut across the wide street.

Once again, they selected only back roads toward the north. Finally, a chalky tapered tower rose up in the night sky ahead—the large radio tower that was the symbol of the Ministry of Defense in the real world.

They walked below the landmark illuminated in the moonlight and crossed Yasukuni Street, and when they slipped through the Ministry of Defense gates, there were already a couple dozen Burst Linkers gathered there. The fact that they had beaten Koto and Yuki

there, even though the twins lived so close by, meant they had definitely not waited until ten seconds in advance to dive as instructed but rather gotten a minute or two head start. Other than that, they were following the items agreed upon at the meeting. Instead of clumping together in the middle of the plaza and making noise, they concealed themselves against the walls, split up by Legion.

On both sides of the plaza tiled in pure-white marble, there was a corridor lined with Grecian pillars, and the members of Leonids were gathered on the east side of it. The first to notice Koto and Yuki approaching was a large avatar who greeted them in a low voice, Legion mainstay Frost Horn.

“Cobal, Manga, good morning.”

“Morning, Horn. And everyone else,” Koto replied, and a chorus of voices responded briefly in kind. The Leonids had always had fewer female members, but the twelve or thirteen people gathered there were all boys. Koto had long ago gotten used to this kind of environment, but sometimes she was jealous of the Legions with a higher ratio of girls. “At ease. We still have two hours. You’re probably all sleep-deprived, so anyone who wants to take a nap, do it now.”

“This is an important mission to rescue Commander Knight. I can’t sleep!” the small avatar who stepped out next to Horn responded in a youthful voice. Named Cerulean Runner, the avatar had the same Japanese design to his armor as Koto’s and Yuki’s. His main weapon was a small Japanese katana, and he’d apparently decided he was going to be a sword master a cut above the rest someday, but unfortunately, the design of the armor covering his head was that of a common soldier’s hat, so he ended up looking more like a foot soldier than a samurai. But just as the name Runner suggested, he was the fastest in the Legion despite being only at level five. If he kept pushing himself in that direction, he would likely come up with an interesting fighting style.

“If you get this worked up now, you won’t last until the real fighting starts,” Koto admonished this young hopeful in a severe voice. “Part of your job is also making sure you rest when you can.”

“...Yes, sir!” Runner assented readily, but he kept glancing at the opposite side of the corridor.

“Something bothering you?” Yuki asked him.

“Oh! Um.” He paused briefly. “I’m actually a fan of Heliosphere over there. Would it be okay if I went and got an autograph?”

“...”

Koto rolled her eyes beneath her armor. Heliosphere was an idol group made up of three F-types belonging to Prominence, and they were fairly popular. This much at least even she knew. “Do as you

like,” she gave permission with a sigh.

“Oh!” Frost Horn interjected. “Then I’m going, too.”

“What? You like Helios, too, Horn?!” Runner responded immediately, and Horn gripped his shoulder tightly.

“I’ll tell you this right now. I was at their first show. Who’s your fave?”

“The leader, Blaze Heart, of course!”

“I’m on Freeze Tone.”

“Oh! Freeze is great, too.”

“Let’s hurry up, then. You talk to them.”

“What?! Horn, no, please, you do it!”

The two receded at a quick pace, chattering all the while, and Koto wordlessly watched them go. After shaking her head at the same time as Yuki, she looked around the plaza once more.

The largest group was Great Wall, in a clump near the main entrance of the Ministry of Defense building on the north side. In the southeast corner was Aurora Oval. The southwest was Crypt Cosmic Circus. And inside the corridor on the west side was Prominence, with Nega Nebulus immediately nearby.

“Hold down the fort here,” Koto murmured to Yuki and walked out of the corridor to cut across the plaza. Ahead of her was “Strong Arm” Sky Raker, whom Koto and Yuki viewed as their greatest rival in the Accelerated World.

Even without including the members of the merged Prominence, Nega Nebulus had grown to a fairly decent size in the blink of an eye, and there were already more than five of them gathered there. But the key person for that day’s mission, Silver Crow, was not among them.

Noticing Koto’s approach, Raker turned around, wheelchair and all, and touched a hand to the brim of her white hat. “Morning, Cobalt. Looking forward to today.”

“Mmm. Crow’s not here yet?”

“No. But no need to worry. He’ll definitely be here in time,” Raker declared, and Cyan Pile, Lime Bell, and Ardor Maiden behind her all nodded.

They firmly believed in Crow. That came across loud and clear, but it didn’t erase the anxiety lurking in Koto’s heart. Wasn’t Crow the kind of guy who would show up with more than enough time to spare when it came to something important like this?

“It’s not that I doubt you, but Crow’s indispensable to today’s mission. Just in case, maybe someone should...” *...go to his house and get him?* She couldn’t bring herself to utter the words.

Suddenly, there was a thunderous collision from the west.

“What was that?!”

By the time Koto cried out, Raker was already racing her

wheelchair toward the gate on the plaza's south side. Koto ran after her, and the executives from the other Legions also started hauling. She leapt out onto Yasukuni Street after Raker and looked to the west.

The earth shook once more.

Bracing her feet, Koto saw a massive shadow approaching from the direction of Akebonobashi Station on the wide road.

"Enemy!" she shouted.

"And it's a Beast class...Flame Blower." Raker had an unusual note of panic in her voice.

Charging toward them and making the ground rumble was a crustacean-type Enemy likely seven or eight meters tall. Countless sturdy legs sprouted from the massive bottom part of the body, reminiscent of a giant isopod, and mouthparts dangled below long, slender compound eyes. These were perfectly shaped to skewer prey, but the name Flame Blower suggested a different purpose.

Suddenly, the Enemy raised those mouthparts. It was targeting the three duel avatars running desperately about twenty meters ahead of it. One was a member of the Leonids; the other two looked to be from Great Wall. Most likely, they had had the bad luck of stumbling along a Beast-class Enemy on their way to the Ministry of Defense.

"Jump to the side!!" Koto yelled, and the duel avatars threw themselves to the left and right. Immediately after that, dazzling orange flames jetted from the Enemy's mouthparts.

Shhhwwmmfff!! Flames shot out more than ten meters and licked a straight line down Yasukuni Street before jetting up high into the sky. Having just barely evaded being roasted alive, the three avatars scrambled to their feet and started running again. But Flame Blower hadn't stopped running while it spewed its fire, so it had made a serious dent in the distance between them. The Burst Linkers would be hard-pressed to dodge the next blow.

"Manga, let's go!" Koto cried.

"Aye!" Yuki responded. They gripped the hilts of their beloved swords and launched off the ground at the same time, while the other Legion executives chased after them.

With more than ten high rankers assembled, the Enemy was no match for them, even if it was a Beast class—was what she wanted to think, but it wasn't as simple as that. Flame Blower had large quantities of fuel inside its body, and if a player made a misstep and destroyed the carapace, it would bring about an enormous explosion. To avoid being caught up in that and dying, the standard play was to keep far enough away from the creature and shoot it full of holes with long-distance firepower, but they couldn't use that move here. If there were any Oscillatory Universe personnel monitoring Kitanomaru Park, there was no way they wouldn't notice a massive explosion near the

Ministry of Defense, which was a mere two kilometers away. The mission members would end up giving Oscillatory time to set a trap.

“Oi! Cobal! Manga! What do we do?!”

Someone chasing Koto and Yuki at top speed called out to them, and when she looked to her right, Koto saw Scarlet Rain. Although she was only 70 percent the height of Koto and Yuki, she looked like she could still run even faster if need be.

“We can’t be all loosey-goosey with this one!” Rain continued.

“Roger that!” Koto replied at maximum speed. “We make ourselves Blower’s target and draw it somewhere far away. I want you to get back to the plaza!”

The Red King, the only king who hadn’t ended up in Unlimited EK at the meeting the day before, was too valuable a battle resource to allow her to put herself in the path of danger. That was Koto’s intent when she spoke, but Rain sped up and started to pull ahead of her.

“Weird, bad sitch here. You gotta know Beast-class Enemies don’t get lured off so easily, yeah?!”

She was exactly right. The higher the Enemy class, the more intelligent the AI they were given, and a half-hearted hate control wouldn’t work on this one. With Koto and the others simply striking at its legs, it would see through to their real purpose of luring it away and not stop its forward charge.

Already, there wasn’t even a hundred meters between them and the charging crustacean. The Enemy raised its mouthparts once more and set its sights on the three duel avatars frantically scrambling down the road ahead of it. Blower had closed most of the distance that separated them, so even if they jumped to the sides, it would kick them flying with its formidable legs.

Even if they had to watch the unfortunate avatars be killed, they would regenerate before the start of the mission. But if they just let them die without at least trying to save them, Koto and her comrades would drop down to the same level as the Acceleration Research Society, which mercilessly used its members as pawns.

The twins tightened their grips on their swords.

With Rangeless Scission, the special attack they held in common, the longer they continued the charging motion of gripping the hilt while the sword was sheathed, the greater the range and force of their attack. This time, they had been charging only for the minute or so since they flew out of Gijo Plaza, but it should have been enough to just barely reach Blower.

However, before they could draw their swords, the Red King whipped out the gun on her hip so fast, the eye couldn’t catch her hand. *Pew, pew!* Her aim was impeccable; consecutive light bullets made a direct hit with Blower’s mouthparts. The Enemy roared like a

conch blowing as it reeled backward. The mouthparts for shooting flames were far tougher than they looked, and destroying them was no easy feat. And even if they were destroyed, that didn't mean the Enemy wouldn't be able to shoot flames any longer. But if you managed to hit with more than a certain amount of force, it could cause a delay in the creature's charge, albeit for only a few seconds.

Not letting the opportunity slip away, the three targeted Linkers ran like frightened rabbits to put some distance between them and it—and in an attempt to join up with Koto and the others. But when two of them peeled off to the sides, Yuki pointed to the rear and shouted, "Keep running into the Ministry of Defense!"

"O-okay!"

"Super sorry about this!"

"Thanks for the assist!"

The three shouted back and ran down Yasukuni Street, stumbling over themselves.

Koto and Yuki abruptly put on the brakes and gave instructions to their comrades.

"Spread out and block the street!"

"Anyone with fire resistance to the front!"

Reacting immediately, the avatars running behind them spread out to both sides. When she checked on the lineup there, in addition to Rain, Koto found Sky Raker and Aqua Current of the Black Legion, Aster Vine and Mauve Wire of the Purple Legion, Iron Pound and Suntan Chafer of the Green Legion, and Blood Leopard of the Red Legion. And she was pretty sure that was Tangerine Ringer and Sax Loader of the Yellow Legion.

With this many powerful fighters, actually splitting Flame Blower's hard carapace wouldn't have been difficult. But then the Enemy would explode spectacularly. In which case, there was only one conclusion.

"We defeat it without making it explode!" Koto declared.

"Seriously?" Iron Pound groaned to her left. "With this guy, it'll take us the whole hour."

"It's to ensure the kings' rescue. We have no choice!" Yuki shouted.

Everyone, including Pound, nodded. Whatever they might have said, not one of the people there thought they could slack off on this rescue mission.

Flame Blower stopped before the twelve of them. It opened its sharp, large jaw to the side of its mouthparts, and a complicated pattern of light raced across its jet-black compound eyes.

The carapace that enveloped Blower's body was a pale red, but the hard shield-shaped armor on its head was a crimson that bordered

on black, and that was its true weak point. When that armor was smashed, the core of the central nervous system was exposed, so if they destroyed that, they would be able to defeat the creature without causing it to explode.

And when defeating an Enemy that way, there was the possibility of a drop of rare material items and Enhanced Armaments in addition to the burst points, so tenacious Enemy-hunting parties would often try their luck on the strategy.

But that armor was also impossibly hard. Hard enough that a high ranker's special attack would shave away only the smallest fraction of it; with a party of thirty people, it would take four or five hours until it shattered. And even with this group, the most powerful lineup in the Accelerated World at present—excluding the kings, of course—Pound's estimate that it would take an hour was pretty much on the mark.

Even so, they had to do it.

“Shooters, keep digging away at the head armor! Attackers, block any leg attacks while targeting the mouthparts! When the flame jets come, judge whether it's vertical or horizontal and evade. Tanks, you protect the shooters for now!” Koto called out one instruction after the next.

“““Aye!””” the entire group yelled in response.

The weak point of its armor was nearly five meters above the ground, so unfortunately, Koto's and Yuki's normal attacks wouldn't reach it. Still, they'd be able to get off one shot each of the Rangeless Scission they'd been charging since they left the plaza.

Here we go, Yuki!

Anytime, Koto!

The twins made eye contact and then spread their legs wide to lower their stance.

“““Rangeless...”””

The call of the technique name was perfectly synchronized but was interrupted by a voice coming from an unexpected direction.

“Hold up!!”

The call came from behind Flame Blower. But not one of their ten comrades had yet gone around behind the Enemy.

“““?!”””

Stunned, Koto and Yuki stopped their attack and opened their eye lenses wide.

Yasukuni Street was half-hidden by the Enemy's massive bulk, but there was a gentle curve to the left around the intersection at Gappazakashita, so they could just barely see past it. Something was

charging toward them at an incredible speed, so low in the air it almost scraped the surface of the road.

It wasn't running. The two wings spread wide shone with reflected moonlight. There were only two Burst Linkers in the Accelerated World who could fly—not glide—under their own power. One of those people, Sky Raker, was ready to fight to Koto's right. So then that was...

“Corvus.”

She wasn't sure whether it was Yuki or her who spoke the name.

As they stood rooted to the spot, the flying avatar rounded the curve, grazing the road with the tip of his wing, and closed in behind Flame Blower. Noticing this, the Enemy started to turn its mouthparts. But by that time, the avatar was already just barely slipping by the Enemy's side, past the mouthparts, and up. Turning so sharply in midair that he nearly left skid marks on the road, he closed in on the armored head. The silver flight avatar—Silver Crow—gripped the hilt of the longsword equipped on his left hip.

Absurd, Koto thought. The shield-shaped armor alone was stronger than even the armor of a Legend class. If he swung at it with that much force, he wouldn't be able completely absorb the blowback, and either the sword would fall or he would drop to the ground.

However...

The sword Crow drew from its scabbard did not send a single spark flying when it hit the crimson armor and pulled out to the right. The tip carved an arc and bounded back before it was brought down, a silver thread of light trailing behind it.

It was curious sword work. Even though it was fast enough that it was all Koto could do to keep it in focus, there was a hint of slowing at the moment it touched the armor, and then it sliced cleanly through without the least resistance.

She'd never seen such a technique—except, no, she felt as though she *had* seen something like it, just a long time ago. A long, long, *long* time ago, back when she and Yuki were still middle rankers who had only just finally gotten to the level of being able to enter the Unlimited Neutral Field.

Cutting off this flash of thought, Koto shouted, “The armor's cracked! Ready projectile attack!”

Silver Crow flew off to the left.

A cross of light flashed across the shield-shaped armor, and it split into four pieces that shot outward, like they had been pushed out from the inside. The creature's central core was revealed, looking just like a massive jellyfish and emitting a disturbing purple light.

“Fire!” Koto shouted.

The long-distance types, including the Red King, launched light

bullets of various colors. An inexperienced party might panic here and miss their mark so that they ended up hitting the torso and causing it to explode, but given that these were the most veteran warriors of each Legion, naturally there was not a single miss; all the bullets were sucked into the jiggly core.

Shuddering intensely, the core swelled up like a balloon and exploded, glowing mucus splattering outward. The three levels of the Enemy's health gauge instantly dropped to zero, and the light faded from its compound eyes, blinked several times, and disappeared. The countless legs lost all power, and the Beast-class Enemy Flame Blower sank its massive bulk onto the road.

The Enemy's body melted into a vast quantity of particles that danced up and scattered in all directions, and the Burst Linkers gave restrained cheers of victory. Koto also unconsciously clenched her fist in front of her before looking for Silver Crow, her other hand still gripping that hilt.

The key figure in the Flame Blower assault was standing on the edge of Yasukuni Street with his back turned to Koto and the others, putting his sword into its sheath again. *Crow!* she was about to call out. And then she froze in place at the same time as Yuki beside her.

"Is that the *real* Silver Crow?" her sister murmured, but Koto couldn't respond. Because she was wondering the exact same thing.

The slender form. The silver metal armor. And more than anything else, the wings folded up on his back. It was the very picture of their familiar Silver Crow, but the air around him was somehow...It was like a veteran of great experience, a high ranker far beyond Koto and Yuki.

Sky Raker and Aqua Current caught up with the twins rooted to the spot.

"Corvus!" Raker called out, and Crow looked back.

Instantly, the curious air around him vanished like smoke, and Crow trotted over to them on brisk feet. He stopped directly in front of them and bowed his head. "I'm sorry I'm late, Master!"

"We were worried. Where on earth were you?"

"Oh, kinda training, kinda finishing up, you know..."

"She made you train right before the mission?!" Raker was outraged. "I'll hang that girl up by her toes!"

"N-n-n-no! I just decided to stay a little longer." Crow scratched his helmet.

"But it looks like you were able to master her sword technique, so I think the training was worth it," Current said.

"No, I mean, mastering it..." He shrugged. "It's more like I finally moved up one tiny step or something."

Koto could restrain herself no longer. She asked over Raker's

shoulder, “Crow, it seems like you’ve been busy, but you *can* take part in today’s mission, yes?”

“Yes, of course, Cobalt!”

His words were heartening, but when she saw him up close, there were countless small cuts carved into his metallic armor—and even places with dark rust.

“You look quite tired. It’s possible to delay the mission start time if it’s just by a little, you know.” She was accidentally more considerate than normal, but Crow shook his head slightly.

“No. Right now, I’m probably—I don’t know...I think I’m kind of in this zone right now.”

“Zone?” Yuki interjected from one side. “Is that why you were able to cut Flame Blower’s armor back there?”

“Probably. I think so. I don’t think I’ll be able to get back into it if I go to sleep, so I’ll keep going to tackle the real mission,” Crow replied, and that aura of an ancient veteran cloaked his body again for an instant. Or so she felt.

Exactly what training had he been doing? And who was “that girl” Raker mentioned? She had plenty of questions, but now was not the time for interrogations. Crow had made it in time for the meetup, and if he could take on the attacker role, then it was Koto and Yuki’s job to make sure he had all the support he needed.

“Understood. Then we start at five AM as planned. Until then, rest your body at least.”

“We’re counting on that technique back there in the mission, too, Crow.”

The twins turned on their heels, and the other Legion members who had been surrounding them at a distance crowded around Crow all at once. Listening to Raker’s voice guarding Crow as the other Burst Linkers thanked him and teased him and questioned him, Koto and Yuki kept walking down the moonlit Yasukuni Street to return to Gijo Plaza. A strange exultation enveloped her, and it seemed to her that it wasn’t only because they had crushed a Beast-class Enemy.

Even after the scheduled 125 days were up, Haruyuki didn't return to the real world. On the last day, he saw Centaurea Sentry off at the portal alone, told her the access code for his home server, and got her to cancel the automatic disconnect timer.

In the schedule discussed with and decided on by Kuroyukihime and the others, they would burst out for a bit at 4:30 AM, go to the washroom, have some water, and do things of that nature before diving once again at ten seconds to five. But if he gave up that break and stayed in the Unlimited Neutral Field, he would have an additional five hundred hours—twenty days and twenty hours—to train.

When he announced his decision, he'd 99 percent expected Sentry to be opposed. But when she heard what he had to say, she thought about it for three seconds before telling him to do what he wanted. On top of that, she lent him the spare key to Oumutei. In exchange, she made him promise not to fight Enemies greater than Wild class and to not go anywhere near Kitanomaru Park, but he'd had absolutely no intention of doing either of those things to begin with.

Alone at Oumutei, Haruyuki kept repeating the same simple training he'd been doing up to that point. Since he couldn't face off against Sentry anymore, he increased his practice swings by a thousand to make up for that absence.

In the end, even after four months, he still couldn't scratch Sentry's armor, but at some point, the impatience he'd felt had disappeared. Haruyuki was not a genius or anything of the like, and he wasn't some chosen warrior, either. With everyone talking about how he possessed the only true flight ability in the Accelerated World, he'd gotten the wrong idea, but his flight was both an advantage and a disadvantage, just one of countless abilities that existed in the world.

The conceit that made him lament that he couldn't stand shoulder to shoulder with a true master like Centaurea Sentry after a mere four months of training was the height of hubris. He decided that if he had time to cry about it, then he had time to swing his sword just one more time, and he threw himself into his training. In actual battles

against lesser-class Enemies, he tried the *Gou* technique that Sentry had shown him but didn't see any real results there, and the "extreme"—the basic principle of Omega style, that of overlaying the maximum on the minuscule—also sometimes worked and sometimes didn't, so occasionally, he died and regenerated.

Even so, two weeks after he started training by himself, Haruyuki suddenly felt like he had reached a type of sensation he'd never known before while practicing his swings in the front garden of Oumutei. He felt the tip of Lucid Blade ripping through empty space not through his palm but in the sword itself. Almost as if the nerves of his avatar had escaped from his hand into the hilt and stretched up along the blade, all the way to the tip.

The more he practiced swinging, the stronger the sensation got, then changed, weakened, and got stronger again. He gave up on going out to fight Enemies, and in the garden where the sakura leaves danced into the air, he intently brought his sword up and down again.

At some point, that iron sphere had appeared in front of him. The perfect iron sphere two meters across that shone dully; the imagined object he had slashed at repeatedly when he was trying to shift to the Highest Level under his own power.

Haruyuki overwrote the iron sphere he'd produced with a new image. From the polished iron to roughly cut tungsten. The most powerful armor material in the Accelerated World, which covered the body of the Carbide Wolf, Wolfram Cerberus, and would likely repel even the "extreme" of Omega style.

From that day on, Haruyuki swung Lucid Blade with this massive tungsten sphere as his opponent. He didn't eat or take breaks, simply collapsed on the gravel and slept when he reached his limit. And when he woke up again, he immediately reached for his sword. The sensation that his nerves were running through the blade was gradually refined, and every time the tip of his sword collided with the tungsten sphere, a sharp pain shot through the core of his head.

Here, he shaved away the excess power of his blows without reducing their speed. When he did, he was able to launch a blow that didn't cause any pain at all, which was accompanied by a remarkably crisp metallic *ting*, just once out of every few hundred swings. It was the same as when he thrust his sword hand at iron armor. The one blow, in which the timing and the movement of his entire body were perfectly aligned down to the single joint, conveyed all the energy to his target and produced zero backlash.

Each day, he swung his sword thousands of times, and each day, the number of critical hits he managed increased bit by bit. Even still, the tungsten sphere was not so much as scratched by his efforts. It sat in the garden of Oumutei looking just as it had when he first imagined

it. On the 145th day, the real last day this time, once he'd succeeded in a series of ten critical hits, Haruyuki stroked the gray sphere gently and said good-bye before leaving Oumutei.

In the Change of the previous day, the stage had turned into a Moonlight stage.

The shortest route to the mustering point at the Ministry of Defense was down Gaien Higashi-dori, but since there was a risk of encountering large Enemies that way, he chose back roads as he headed south, and when he finally joined up with Yasukuni Street at Akebonobashi Station, some familiar Burst Linkers were facing off against a Beast-class Enemy up ahead. And that was that.

He had fought the difficult Enemy Flame Blower just once before. He flew into the battlefield in a trance and severed the armor of its weak point with the "extreme," and it was then that Haruyuki finally realized he was not his usual self. The supposedly high-resistance armor felt like semihard jelly beneath his blade. If this was a kind of awakened state due to his continued image training against the tungsten sphere, it definitely wouldn't last long.

Given this firm conviction, Haruyuki told Cobalt Blade that he would keep going to tackle the mission. However...

"Aah, aah, aah! Why are you so beat up and rusted when we haven't even started the mission yet?!"

Welcoming Haruyuki when he arrived at Gijo Plaza was this scolding shout from Lime Bell.

"Your health gauge has to be down with all this! How much you got left?!"

"N-no, it's not down as far as it looks," he protested. "The scratches and rust are just from sleeping on the gravel and getting stuck in the rain in the Primeval Forest stage."

"What?! Why were you doing stuff like that?! At least sleep here for an hour!"

Thus ordered, it was hard to come out and say no. He sought help with his eyes from Cyan Pile, who was standing next to her, but his other childhood friend only shook his head silently.

"Corvus, could I bother you a minute?" Sky Raker called to him, and Haruyuki looked to the side. The avatar in the white dress seated in the wheelchair continued, the hat of the same color tilting to one side. "As far as I know, there is no such thing as a 'zone' system-wise in the Accelerated World. If it's something that derives from the person's mental state, then it won't last a few seconds, much less an hour. If you feel like you've grasped something essential here, Corvus, it won't vanish just because you take a little nap."

"...B-but..." Touching the hilt of Lucid Blade with one hand, he

persisted, "I want to do everything I can to help Kuroyukihime. To the point where I actually don't even want to put my sword in its scabbard. If we have another hour, then doing some practice swings would be way better than sleeping."

Raker sighed a little before opening her mouth to say something. But before she could, a childish yet resolute voice rang out.

"C, if you intend to be thoroughly prepared, then now is the time you should rest."

When he shifted his gaze, Ardor Maiden's cute eye lenses were staring straight at him.

"Mei..."

"That is not advice. That is an order from one of the Four Elements!" Maiden declared and sat formally on her knees in front of one of the pillars lining the corridor. She patted her lap wrapped in crimson *hakama*-style armor. "Mmm!"

"Mmm...?"

"Mmm!!"

"..."

He looked at Takumu again, and this time, he nodded together with Chiyuri. Haruyuki gave up at last and lay down beside Utai, putting his head on her small lap.

There's no way I can sleep in this situation! he thought.

"Springtime haze lingers, as though a bloom of the distant moon."

The instant Utai murmured this bit of verse, a warm breeze blew through and caressed his face. The scent of flowers. The bright sunlight. His consciousness was sucked away to a distant place.

But he quickly snapped his eyes open with a gasp and blinked repeatedly. *No, whoa, I'm really gonna fall asleep here.*

"Did you sleep well, C?" Utai asked, having lent him her lap as a pillow.

"Huh?" Haruyuki stared up intently at her cherubic face mask. "I just drowsed for a second there."

"What are you talking about, Crow? You've been out like a light on Mei's lap for fifty minutes now!" Chiyuri told him from above.

He bounced up. "What?!" And then he saw that indeed, the number of duel avatars gathered in the plaza had nearly doubled from the time he borrowed Ardor Maiden's lap. And more than anything else, his head was impossibly clear. Forget fifty minutes; it felt like he had slept a full eight hours.

He hurriedly grabbed the hilt of Lucid Blade, but it didn't feel like that connection had been cut off. It seemed Fuko had been right about his "zone." He looked around, wondering where Fuko was anyway, and saw her talking with the leaders from the other Legions in the center of Gijo Plaza. So he turned back to Utai, still sitting formally on

her knees, and sat up on his own knees before bowing his head to her.

“Um. Mei, thank you so much. I feel really refreshed.”

“That’s wonderful, then. I’ll make a lap pillow for you again anytime.”

“O-okay, please and thank you,” Haruyuki mumbled in reply, and the three members of Petit Paquet giggled behind Chiyuri. Shrinking into himself, he let his gaze wander farther. Magenta Scissor was also standing with the three girls, but naturally, their Legion Master, Black Lotus, was not there, and neither was Centaurea Sentry. She must have stayed with Kuroyukihime in the real world. In her place, someone else, someone he wanted to see before the mission no matter what, appeared.

“Lead!” Haruyuki shouted and almost pitched forward as he stood up and dashed his way over to the indigo samurai who stood next to Chiyuri and Takumu.

The young warrior bowed in greeting. “Aah, Crow. Excuse me for being la—”

“I’m sorry!!” Haruyuki interrupted the other Burst Linker and bowed deeply. When he finally lifted his head after holding this pose for a full three seconds, he met the eyes of a bewildered Trilead Tetroxide.

“Wh-what’s the matter, Crow?”

“It’s just...at the Legion meeting before, we decided *you’d* be the attacker, and then I went and enhanced my own sword.”

The air of a clear smile bled out from Trilead’s face mask. He raised both hands and clasped Haruyuki’s shoulders firmly. “I heard about the situation at the time of your encounter with the blacksmith. You made the right decision. There is no need for you to apologize.”

“But you’re a way better swordsman than I am,” Haruyuki protested.

“No, I understand. You did some very difficult training for today, did you not? And saying that you snatched away the most dangerous attacker role and then apologizing for it, that is what one would call being far too nice.” Lead smiled again before patting Haruyuki’s shoulders and lowering his hands.

Takumu chuckled. “Well, that sort of thing is really just how H—Crow is. I could tell at a glance you did some serious sword training, Crow. All the Burst Linkers here have zero objections to entrusting you with the attacker role.”

“Zero...?” Haruyuki murmured, and then suddenly, Chiyuri whacked him on the back. He didn’t need to be told out loud that she meant he should stand tall.

If Takumu, Trilead, and the rest of the people there recognized Haruyuki’s value, then it was all thanks to Centaurea Sentry, who had

given him close instruction over these long four months. When he closed his eyes, he moved past the wall between worlds and sent a thought to Seri, who would have been in the Arita living room.

Thank you, Maestro. I am definitely going to cut into Inti's core.

Naturally, he got no response, but he felt like a single sakura petal drifted across the back of his eyelids.

July 23, 5:00 AM.

The ninety-six Burst Linkers from five Legions who had gathered in Gijo Plaza moved eastward on Yasukuni Street in rows of four. Their scouts, who had returned a little earlier—Blood Leopard, who had remarkable mobility, and Mustard Salticid, who excelled in enemy detection—had confirmed there were no Enemies wandering along the road. If Oscillatory personnel were indeed monitoring Kitanomaru Park, there was no way they wouldn't notice the approach of such a large group. But even if they immediately returned to the real world through a portal, no matter how veteran the Linker, it would take a minimum of ten seconds to contact their comrades and get the timing sorted out. That was two hours, forty-six minutes, forty seconds on this side. Since the Inti mission of necessity had to be a short, decisive battle, if they succeeded, that would be plenty of time to regenerate the kings and retreat.

Although they were a large group of nearly a hundred, almost none of them were talking. Bathed in the moonlight, they marched forward in quiet formation.

When the outer moat came into view ahead of them, Aqua Current, walking on Haruyuki's right, said slowly in a hush, "I remember—" But then she added right away, "No, never mind."

Haruyuki was about to ask her what she remembered, and then he understood. Three years earlier—August 2044. After their Legion Master, the Black King, had pushed Red Rider to total point loss and a general attack from the six Great Legions became impossible to avoid, the members of the first Nega Nebulus had launched an attack on the Castle to make the Black King take back her statement of retirement. Naturally, Haruyuki hadn't seen it, but he'd heard they'd advanced on the Castle under the night sky of an Aurora stage.

But the strength of the Four Gods, the Super-class Enemies guarding the four gates, was beyond anything they'd imagined, so Nega Nebulus divided into four squads for the attack and was annihilated a mere 120 seconds from the start of the attack. Ardor Maiden had fallen into an Unlimited EK at Suzaku's southern gate, Aqua Current at Seiryu's eastern gate, and Graphite Edge at Genbu's northern gate, and only Black Lotus and Sky Raker, who had attacked Byakko's western gate, succeeded in escaping, thanks to Raker's Gale

Thruster. The Legion crumbled, and the Black Legion's flag disappeared from the Accelerated World for two years.

Akira was likely seeing their march from that time on top of the formation heading toward Kitanomaru Park now. And then she'd realized she was implying an unfortunate future and taken back her words.

Abruptly, Fuko, moving forward in her wheelchair to Akira's right, grabbed Akira's hand. Reflexively, Haruyuki squeezed Akira's other hand. The slender hand covered in flowing water twitched but soon squeezed back. Utai, to the far right, grabbed Fuko's hand and connected the four of them.

Walking slightly ahead, Chiyuri, Takumu, Lead, and Niko also joined hands. When he looked back, he saw that Shihoko, Satomi, Yume, and Rui had done the same. The wave of hand-holding spread forward and backward from Nega Nebulus in the center, and the members of the other Legions joined hands happily—or else somewhat shyly.

The twenty-four rows of four crossed the outer moat over the Ichigaya bridge and passed in front of Yasukuni Shrine, now transformed into a chalky palace. They went up the gentle slope, and when they reached the intersection at Kudanshita, he finally saw it.

The flat land spreading out on the right side of the road was Kitanomaru Park. And beyond it, the massive ball of flames burning red-hot in the place where the Nippon Budokan would have been—the Legend-class Enemy the Sun God Inti. The distance between them was perhaps three hundred meters. A faint heat he hadn't felt when he'd scouted the location with Sentry crackled against his avatar's armored surface.

At the head of the army, Cobalt Blade raised her left hand swiftly, her right still firm on the hilt of her sword. The ninety-six Burst Linkers came to a halt at once. In the back of his brain, he replayed what Cobalt and Manganese had said right before their departure:

“Listen, Crow. We have seven lines for the synergy to charge Lime Bell's special-attack gauge. We did a test run while you were sleeping, but even with all seven lines on full blast, the longest Citron Call could continuously fire was seventy-three seconds.”

“Taking into consideration escape time, you can't use the whole seventy-three seconds. If you haven't managed to cut Inti's core after sixty seconds, escape. In the worst case, you also end up in Unlimited EK, and if that happens, we won't be able to plan our next attempt.”

Sixty seconds.

That was an extremely short time limit for an attack on a Legend-class Enemy, but Omega style wagered everything on a single blow. Whether or not Haruyuki's “extreme” worked on Inti's core, the result

would be clear in half of those sixty seconds.

At the Legion meeting two days earlier, Fuko had said the ideal would be to create three lines of gauge-recovery synergy. And the executive members of the Great Legions had racked their brains to produce seven lines for him. Whatever happened, he had to live up to their expectations.

Bringing her hand down, Cobalt called out in a clear voice: "From here on out, Incarnate System is permitted! Naturally, Enemies may be drawn in from any and all directions, but the non-synergy group will repel them with general force, so the synergy team and the attacker are not to worry about the rear. Execute your mission with all your might!"

From beside her, Manganese shouted next: "The five contact Linkers are already on standby in front of the portal at Chiyoda Ward Office, directly east of Kitanomaru Park! Once they confirm Inti's defeat, they will leave immediately and inform the kings. When the kings regenerate, we will all guard them as we move to the ward office and leave to complete the mission! Does anyone have questions?!"

Not a single person raised their hand. Haruyuki also had nothing left to ask at this point, but next to him, Akira murmured, "Um, who is the contact for us anyway?"

"Ash." It was Fuko on Akira's other side who responded. "He's already on standby at the ward office."

"Huh," Haruyuki said. "R—I mean, Ash is?"

"I thought about asking someone from the Petit Paquet group at first, but then I got a message that Lotus and Ash were staying over at your house, Corvus, so I left it to him instead. It's probably two seconds faster than sending a mail after bursting out, so it works out well." Fuko smiled as she told him this, and in her voice, he sensed something scary. He bobbed his head up and down.

"We begin the mission to attack the Sun God Inti now!" Cobalt raised her voice once again from the front of the army. "Anyone with buff abilities, cast everything you've got on us now!"

At this order, light of every color shone from all parts of the group. Ardor Maiden changed the bow in her right hand to a fan and danced gracefully. A veil of light enveloped the armor of everyone there and then disappeared, sinking into it.

"We go down the hill and charge into the park through the Tayasumon gate!" Manganese yelled when the buffs were finished. "Once the synergy team is deployed, the attack begins! Go!"

Nearly one hundred Burst Linkers thrust fists high into the air instead of issuing a battle cry. Cobalt and Manganese looked back and also brandished their left hands before throwing them down. The

enormous army began to race down Yasukuni Street.

After two hundred meters, they turned right, crossed the bridge over the inner moat, and slipped through Tayasumon gate, now transformed into a splendid archway. And the Sun God Inti appeared in all its majesty once more after disappearing from sight momentarily.

There weren't even fifty meters separating them from the large ball of flames at that point. The moonlight pouring down from the night sky was erased by the crimson flames, and an intense wave of heat scorched the air. The ground where Inti's lower half touched it had become a lake of magma, melted red-hot, which made an unsettling burbling noise.

But the elite members of the synergy team did not flinch. Instead, they deployed themselves in the chalky plaza in seven small teams, and then they were awash in the light of special attacks and Incarnate techniques. In the center of it all, Lime Bell readied the Enhanced Armament on her left arm, Choir Chime.

"Anytime you're ready, Crow!"

Guided by Chiyuri's voice, Haruyuki opened wide the wings on his back. From even farther back, the voices of the defense team joined in.

"You got this, Crow!"

"I know you can do it, C!"

"Get in there, Corvus!"

Cheers from the other Legions soon drowned out those voices.

Haruyuki took a deep breath. "Here I go!"

He drew Lucid Blade from its scabbard and pushed off the ground. He vibrated the ten metal fins that made up his wings and flew at top speed. The two-meter ball of flames that had caused the instantaneous deaths of the five kings grew closer and closer. When he charged into the heat-death zone, Chiyuri shouted her technique name—

"Citron Caaaaaaaall!!"

—and at basically the same time, a heat so intense he almost couldn't believe it cooked his metallic armor to the point of fusion in an instant. The moment his health gauge started to drop, a lime-green light enveloped him from behind. Citron Call Mode I, the Watch Witch's—Lime Bell's—special attack, rewound time for the target and recovered any damage, an ability even rarer than Silver Crow's flight. Its drainage of her special-attack gauge was all that much more intense for that, but if the other Burst Linkers kept on recovering her gauge, in theory, they could create an invulnerable state. Supposedly.

Even after time started rewinding, Haruyuki's health gauge continued to drop incrementally. At that pace, he wouldn't last until the sixty-second time limit given to him by Cobalt and Manganese.

More likely, fifty—no, forty-five seconds was the limit.

Works for me!! Haruyuki roared in a corner of his heart and lifted both hands to brandish Lucid Blade.

He charged into the center of the swirling nuclear fusion. In an opening there, he caught a glimpse of the thorny crown that held Inti's body—the Arc Luminary's circlet.

If he could destroy that crown, Inti would escape the White King's control and roll off somewhere following its own original movement patterns. The kings would be able to regenerate then, but in the past, the White King had confined the blacksmith NPC Mr. Smith and gotten him to enhance the Luminary to void the effects of fire damage. In which case, there was no reason she wouldn't have also enhanced it to be immune to physical damage at the same time. And if that were the case, the principle of Omega style probably wouldn't work on it. As Sentry said, Omega style wasn't an Incarnate technique, so it couldn't go beyond the system. Thus, Haruyuki tossed aside the option of slicing into the crown and plunged deeper into the flames.

He saw it. No, *felt* it.

Deep in the crimson flames was a spherical body shining like lava. This was the core of the Sun God Inti—its true body.

Forty seconds left.

The core was nearly fifteen meters across. From extremely close-up, it was nothing more than a gently curving wall, but given that it had some curvature, he would be able to find the minuscule. He caught that lone point not with his vision but with image power and brought down his beloved sword.

Lucid Blade sliced through the swirling flames and closed in on Inti's true body. The blade was instantly red-hot. The effects of Citron Call didn't extend to Enhanced Armaments; if he hadn't gotten Mr. Smith to enhance it to nullify flame damage, the sword would have evaporated without ever reaching the main body.

But his blade blocked the high heat with the crimson light it emitted, and the tip at last touched the enemy's body.

There was just one tier to the health gauge displayed in Haruyuki's field of view. Even Einherjar, whom he'd fought at Midtown Tower, had had four levels, but—no, he could wonder about that later. Right now, he had to think of nothing but cutting the main body and knocking that single tier flying.

His sword and the nerves of his hands connected once more, and he felt Inti's body at the tip of the blade.

It was hard. Harder than the tungsten ball he'd conjured at the end of his training. Such a fearsome physical density. Even Flame Blower's armor was like a cracker compared with this core.

He was going to be repelled. Shot through with this fleeting

premonition, Haruyuki gritted his teeth. His own health gauge was already down to 70 percent. He'd be able to attack only two more times at most, and if his first attack was repelled, then the result would be the same for the second and third.

Kuroyukihime.

A vision of her rose up in the back of his mind, the way he'd seen her last—lying on her side, sleeping, her face innocent.

At that very moment, she was waiting impatiently in the Arita living room for the notice of Inti's destruction. Whether she'd be able to escape from the Unlimited EK rested on this blow struck by Haruyuki.

Over the sleeping face, he saw a series of eight digits: 20320930—the number printed beneath the bar code on the back of her neck.

He wanted to save her.

Not just from the Unlimited EK. He wanted to save the Kuroyukihime who had been born a machine child and lived her life with a deep sense of alienation. He wanted to help her. He wanted to see the end of this world with her.

You can do it.

He heard a voice.

You got this.

I'm sure you can do it.

You will do this.

I know you can do this.

I'm telling you, you can do it.

So many voices flowed through his body.

Yes, you of all people may accomplish it. You, our first and last student.

Now, have faith...And cut!!

“Extreme!!!”

Haruyuki turned the entirety of his will into power and focused it on the single, minimal point where his blade touched Inti's body, and he brought the sword straight down.

Keeeeeeeeee!!

He heard a sharp, fleeting squeal.

And then he saw it:

A pure-white line stretching out along the surface of the red-hot body. It finally reached the top and bottom poles and kept going around the rear to connect.

The silver crown that encircled the red orbit broke apart and

scattered soundlessly.

And then the main body of the Legend-class Enemy the Sun God Inti slowly split into two. A stream of incredible heat energy spiraled out, jetted up, and burned the night sky of the Moonlight stage red.

...Is it over...?

Although he felt it in his sword, Haruyuki couldn't quite believe it in his head, and he gaped at the endless stream of energy. The spiraling flames scattered far and wide in the distant sky, like a twisted thread unraveling, and made an enormous red flower bloom above.

The crimson cascade seemed like it would rise forever, but eventually, it gradually weakened and grew narrower, pulsing irregularly, until it disappeared.

At the same time as Inti's health gauge was depleted, the bisected body was dyed blue and then shattered, flinging out more fragments than any other Enemy he'd ever defeated. A massive amount of burst points was added to his total, and it seemed like several items also dropped, but Haruyuki couldn't even put the lowered Lucid Blade away, much less check his storage.

We'll have to split the points and items among everyone who took part in the mission. This thought absently wandering through his mind, he finally lifted his beloved sword.

The thin blade was nicked and gouged here and there, and several cracks ran across it. This damage wouldn't be recovered until he logged in again.

Thanks, he told the sword that had endured Inti's flames and gently sheathed it. With his left hand still on the hilt, he continued hovering.

"Crow, you did it! But we helped a little!"

Hearing Chiyuri's voice, he hurriedly looked back. He saw Lime Bell (who had healed him), the synergy team (who had kept charging her special-attack gauge), and the defense team (who were in a semicircle around them). And farther back, he saw strange shadows writhing. The synergy team had used Incarnate techniques, and that signature had drawn nearby Enemies.

Fortunately, they all seemed to be lesser or Wild class, with no Beast class among them, but there were a lot of them. If the Burst Linkers didn't clear them away before Kuroyukihime and the other kings dived in, he didn't know what would happen.

The contact personnel for each Legion on standby at the Chiyoda Ward Office would have left via the portal after seeing Inti's demise. It would take a minimum of two seconds for them to wake up in the real world and contact their masters and then for the kings to call the

acceleration command. That was thirty minutes and change on this side. They had to smash the herd of Enemies before that.

“Bell, let’s go!” Haruyuki shouted, scraping together the last of his remaining strength. He landed next to Chiyuri, and they both started running. The various members of the synergy team grinned at Haruyuki and gave him a thumbs-up as they scattered toward the front line.

Here, finally, the reality hit him—that he had crushed the Sun God Inti, a Legend-class Enemy no one had ever been able to defeat before. But of course, it wasn’t something he had done alone. If it hadn’t been for everyone there with him in that moment, the many people who had guided him in his life, and the rivals who had honed him, the feat would have been utterly impossible.

We did it, Kuroyukihime! We did it, Maestro! Haruyuki sent the thought toward the women in the real world as he ran even harder to lend his strength to Cyan Pile and Magenta Scissor fighting a lizard-type Enemy with two heads.

Even with the fiercest warriors of the six Great Legions assembled, it took nearly twenty minutes to destroy the entire herd of more than twenty Enemies. If they had all launched Incarnate techniques, they could have cleared them out in half that time—well, probably in less than five minutes, but then that would call over new Enemies. Thus, they brought them down one by one with normal and special attacks, and when the last one, a large Wild class, scattered on the wind, Haruyuki sank to the ground on the spot, utterly and thoroughly spent.

He fought without the nicked Lucid Blade—with only his punches and kicks—for the first time in a while, but it took a bit of time to remember how to get distance from opponents and how to move his body. He would have to make sure to keep training in hand-to-hand combat while he continued with his sword.

“Excellent work, Crow,” someone said, offering him a hand.

When he looked up, Trilead Tetroxide stood there smiling, having sheathed the Arc of Infinity. Haruyuki took the hand and pulled himself to his feet, but he didn’t have enough strength left in his legs, so he staggered, and Trilead immediately wrapped an arm around his back to hold him up.

“Th-thanks, Lead.”

“I should say the same,” the young samurai responded in a voice thick with emotion. “You showed me a wonderful technique there. You only just offered yourself to the sword, and yet you launched such a blow as that. What depth of training would be required...”

“Nah.” Haruyuki brushed it off. “I was just swinging my sword at nothing every day.”

“I see.” Trilead nodded solemnly. “Yes, the empty swing really is the basis for everything else. I want to go back to my beginner days and do my training over again.”

“What?! That’s way too much, Lead!”

As they spoke, the rest of their Nega Nebulus comrades surrounded them. All of them had warm smiles on their face masks, and when they met Haruyuki’s eyes, they nodded deeply. The last to

come forward was Fuko, who stood from her wheelchair and placed a hand on Haruyuki's shoulder.

"Now then, Corvus," she said. "Shall we go and welcome our master?"

"Yes!" he cried, pulling away from Lead's hand to stand tall. He was one step away from collapsing from total exhaustion, but he couldn't do that until he had witnessed Kuroyukihime's return.

Together with the members of the other Legions, he started walking toward the remains of the Budokan arena from which Inti had vanished. The ground had turned into a lake of magma but soon cooled and formed a rocky crater. If the five kings had hurried to dive, they would regenerate there in less than ten minutes.

Inside the crater, he couldn't see any sign of Wolfram Cerberus's or Black Vise's death markers in the place where they had died with the kings—naturally, they had avoided Unlimited EK with a forced disconnect. But there was no way they would try to regenerate now, surrounded by enemies. Haruyuki didn't care if Black Vise stayed dead forever, but he had to somehow separate Cerberus from the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II.

Hang on just a little longer, Cerberus. I'm definitely going to free you from the Acceleration Research Society, Haruyuki called out to the fighting genius who was both a rival and a friend as he looked up at the night sky.

Directly above them, the heat energy released from Inti's main body was still quietly swirling. It was compressed to about half the size it'd been immediately after the explosion, so it would likely disappear soon enough. But the fact that it had lasted for more than twenty minutes now showed the amount of energy the Sun God contained, a terrifying volume.

Looking up next to him, Ardor Maiden said dubiously, "Is that Inti's flames?"

"Y-yeah. It was expelled when I cut the main body. I'm glad it went up. If it had spread out to the sides, it could have swallowed and killed all of us," he said half-jokingly.

Maiden kept her gaze on the sky. "Fu? Have you ever seen a phenomenon like this, where the energy alone remains after the Enemy's death?"

Fuko cocked her head in thought before answering. "No, I don't think so. But Inti was nonstandard from start to finish, so maybe this is also part of that?"

"I...suppose..." Utai frowned.

Haruyuki took his gaze off her and looked up once more at the lingering red fire spreading out across the night sky. The Enemy had died, but its energy remained. For some reason, this worked at

something inside his brain.

There was no way he would have seen something Fuko hadn't. And yet he felt like he had witnessed a similar phenomenon somewhere before...At Tokyo Midtown Tower, after a fight that felt as hard as this one with Inti...

"Metatron's...first form." Haruyuki unconsciously stiffened at the words that spilled from his mouth.

Even after they destroyed the first form of the Legend-class Enemy the Archangel Metatron, the long protrusion growing from her head lingered in the sky. It had been an object, not energy, but as a phenomenon, it was the same. That protrusion had unraveled from its spiral form, and Metatron's second form, her true self, had appeared from inside.

...What if?

What if, what if...?

The Sun God Inti Haruyuki had cut into twenty minutes earlier.

What if that was its *first form*?

This thought was like having a bucket of cold water thrown on him.

The flames swirling in the sky high above were spinning faster. In the center, a small point of light flickered.

Suddenly, Haruyuki understood. The heat energy hadn't just been contracting. It was condensing. It was coming together over time, trying to produce something new.

It had taken less than a minute for the second form to appear after Metatron's first form was destroyed, so why was it taking more than twenty minutes in Inti's case?

To give them time to run away. Meaning whatever was going to appear was that big and scary.

"Gang..." Haruyuki took a deep breath to shout *Get away from here!*

But before he could get the words out of his throat, a beam of crimson light shot directly downward from the center of the swirling flames. Slamming into the bottom of the crater, the light beam moved back and forth and side to side at top speed, generating something, almost like a 3D printer. Two very thick, very long pillars, red as blood.

At first, he thought it was a building. But the pillars fused about fifty meters up in the air and turned into one fat pillar. Two more slender pillars were drawn out in the air, and these too fused into a thick pillar a hundred meters up. Finally, an elliptical protrusion was added, and the beam of light disappeared.

"A giant..." Takumu murmured behind him.

And indeed, what appeared in the bottom of the crater was a

The falling stars were still coming. Now three more fell, hitting the torso and forming crowns around the chest, stomach, and hips.

Here, finally, the giant's movement stopped. The pattern of circles on its face flashed at short intervals, muddying the pure-white light. The arms hung limply, and the massive bulk leaned forward very slightly.

After checking that the giant was completely still, Haruyuki turned his gaze to the heavens.

Something was descending slowly against the backdrop of the pale moon. A Pegasus with white hair and wings on its back spiraled downward, moving the hooves of its four limbs in the air. On the horse's back was a knight clad entirely in silver armor. And one more person.

White. Dress armor whiter than the moon wrapped the impossibly slender body. Long golden hair fluttered in the night breeze. The face mask was backlit, so he couldn't make out any features, but an elegant crown rested on her head, and she held a long staff in one hand.

The Pegasus landed on the left shoulder of the giant and folded its wings.

Haruyuki knew the name of the knight avatar gripping the reins: the first of the Seven Dwarves, Basher aka Platinum Cavalier. But he had never seen the snow-white F-type avatar sitting sidesaddle in front of him. Was this the fifth or sixth of the Seven Dwarves, who so far had not shown themselves? But he was pretty sure their color names were not in the "white" line...



Standing up from her wheelchair, Fuko spoke in a voice that made almost no sound. “Cosmos.”

He needed about half a second to discern the meaning of the utterance.

Cosmos.

In other words—she meant this F-type avatar was the Legion Master of Oscillatory Universe, the chair of the Acceleration Research Society, Transient Eternity, the White King, White Cosmos. The one who had driven Saffron Blossom to total point loss; produced the Armor of Catastrophe and the ISS kits; manipulated her own sister and Brain Burst-child, Kuroyukihime, into taking the head of the previous Red King—the root evil of all these tragedies.

But the White King had never shown herself to them before—excluding the one time when she’d appeared at the Umesato school festival in a Gallery-use dummy avatar. So why now? Why here?

To tame the second form of the Sun God Inti? Had she helped the Burst Linkers just when they were about to be trampled down even further? Haruyuki wondered this in his half-numb brain, and in his ear, he heard a voice he’d heard just once before. Sweet like that of a young girl, pure like a noble holy woman.

“Thank you, Silver Crow.” Although Cosmos was a hundred meters above them, her voice penetrated Haruyuki’s mind with perfect clarity. “I’m a little surprised and greatly delighted that it was you who cracked the egg that I could not, no matter what I tried. You really have gotten strong, hmm?”

“E-egg...?”

“This Enemy that was called the Sun God Inti is an egg that encloses all of this universe’s distortions.” The White King spoke as if she’d heard Haruyuki’s hoarse voice. “When it breaks, the end of the world begins. Let me introduce you.”

Cosmos lightly waved the staff—no, scepter—in her hand, and the dark-red giant began to move once more, bringing its right hand to its chest.

“Super-class Enemy Deity of Demise, Tezcatlipoca.”

Haruyuki cocked his head, feeling like he’d heard that somewhere.

“Enough of your lies, Cosmos!” A sharp voice came from the group. It was the vice leader of the Purple Legion, Aster Vine. “Inti is a god from Incan mythology! It doesn’t make sense that an Aztec god would come out of it!”

“Hee-hee. I suppose not,” Cosmos agreed. “But you see, Aster, hun. There’s no real meaning to the names used in this world. The majority of proper names are just things the system scooped up and embedded somewhere. Even my name and yours, hmm?”

Haruyuki abruptly realized White Cosmos hadn't tamed Inti's second form—what she was calling Tezcatlipoca—in order to save the Burst Linkers. There was no way she would do that. She didn't care whether they lived or died.

Almost as if to affirm this flash of insight, the White King raised her scepter. "Now then, all the necessary cards are laid out here. As a thank-you, I'll let you be the first to see Tezcatlipoca's power."

When she waved the scepter gently, the giant moved the hand on its chest, spread its fingers wide, and turned to Haruyuki and the others.

"Retreat!!" Cobalt Blade shouted.

Not even one tenth of a second later, nearly one hundred Burst Linkers whirled around and started to run toward the Tayasumon gate.

However...

A black ring appeared in the palm of the giant's hand. Once again, he heard the low, heavy sound like a mountain rumbling. Haruyuki's body was suddenly heavy like lead, and he sank to his knees. All around him, his comrades were thrusting their hands against the ground. The sole exception was Sky Raker, sitting in her wheelchair, but the slender wheels screeched and squealed and seemed ready to come apart at any second.

In front of him, Chocolat Puppeteer, unable to bear the weight pressing down on her, fell forward. Cracks appeared in her chocolate armor, and a faint scream slipped out of her.

"Choco!" Haruyuki stretched a hand out as far as he could, but he couldn't reach her. Most likely, the giant's hand was amplifying the local gravity.

The speed at which his health gauge dropped was surprisingly gentle, but even so, if this crushing kept up, he would die at some point. To escape, they were probably going to have to do something about the giant's—Tezcatlipoca's—hand.

"Fight, everyone!" Haruyuki squeezed out and changed the orientation of his body so he could claw at the ground.

It seemed like Tezcatlipoca was retreating bit by bit. Still maintaining the gravity attack with its right hand, it walked backward and stepped out of the crater. The White King on its shoulder was no longer looking at Haruyuki and his comrades. She was staring intently at the empty center of the crater.

There's nothing there, though. This thought abruptly turned into a shiver up his spine strong enough to freeze all the blood in his body.

There was nothing there *now*. But there would be something. Soon...Maybe in a few seconds.

"...No..." As he fought to stand against the strong gravity,

Haruyuki screamed as if he were ripping his throat apart. “No!! You can’t come!!”

But his voice wouldn’t cross the wall between worlds.

His worst fear became reality two seconds later.

A small light appeared in the center of the crater. It quickly grew and became a small, spinning icon. A death marker. But because more than enough time had passed since its owners had died, the marker immediately deployed to regenerate the lost Burst Linker.

The first to appear was the Yellow King, Yellow Radio.

All of the contact personnel had apparently carried out their duties at top speed. Less than a second later, the next marker appeared, and the Green King, Green Grandé, was regenerated, followed by the Purple King, Purple Thorn; the Blue King, Blue Knight; and then...the Black King, Black Lotus. The five level niners who had at last escaped the Sun God Inti’s Unlimited EK.

The White King called down from on high, “It is unfortunate that we have to say good-bye so soon after being reunited. Good-bye, my friends. Good-bye, my beloved child. You performed your roles wonderfully, right up until the end.” As if with great reluctance, she slowly lowered the scepter.

Tezcatlipoca raised its left hand and turned it toward the five kings. A circle of crimson light shone in its open palm.

To be continued.

AFTERWORD

Kawahara here. It's been a while. Today, I'm bringing you *Accel World 24: Sword Sage of the Blue Flower*.

I feel like for the last however many volumes, I've apologized for the gap between volumes in the afterword, and again with this volume, I made you wait a full eleven months. And with so many volumes drawing the story out—always “to be continued”—when there's a yearlong gap, you do forget the details of the previous volume, hmm? My reputation is in tatters...

Naturally, the story has advanced quite a bit, and now I feel that in the next volume, we're finally coming to the end of the White Legion arc, ongoing since Volume 17. Oh, you there! You don't believe that! And with good reason! Well, I'll leave talking about the next volume to the next volume and touch on the content of Volume 24 here.

(Spoilers ahead. Beware!)

In the Accelerated World, there is an exception to every rule, and in this volume, the long-dead Sentry is brought back to life. As she herself says, this method will not apply to all of the exiled (in practice, it was usable only by Sentry), but there is also the example of Orchid Oracle brought back through different means, so we do become a little anxious about what will happen in the future. I was surprisingly happy, however, to have been able to fully depict Centaurea Sentry and her real-world self when she has been nothing but a mysterious voice up to this point. So the subtitle for this volume, which I'd originally thought to make something to do with Inti, I instead decided to make something about Sentry. For Haruyuki, this means yet another young lady in the position of teacher to him, but he was born under that sort of star, so I get the feeling Sentry will not be the last of these young women.

And as is our custom here, my recent doings...As usual, I've been extraordinarily busy with all kinds of things concerning the media mix

for another series. This year is the tenth anniversary of the publication of that series, and those involved are kindly making all kinds of plans for it, but it is also the tenth anniversary of *Accel World*! And yet there is nothing here, which makes me extremely depressed, so at the very least, I've been wondering if there isn't something I can do as an individual.

In my personal life...there is nothing in particular as always, but my move-house gauge is steadily filling up. This time, somewhere near the sea or the mountains would be delightful!

In conclusion, I'm so sorry for all the trouble I cause to HIMA and to editors Miki and Adachi in pushing things right to the very edge every single time. Thank you for always sticking with me! And to everyone who has read this far, I sincerely look forward to seeing you again in the next volume!

Reki Kawahara
On a certain day in June 2019

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